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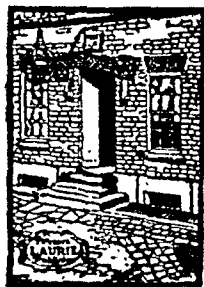
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THE PHANTOM GONDOLA



MAURICE DEKOBRA

Born in Paris in 1883. French correspondent in Scandinavia, Russia, Germany and England. Lecturer at the University of Berlin, afterwards art critic in Vienna and in New York. Special correspondent in New York in 1920 for *La Liberté* and the *Revue des Deux Mondes*. Made an extended automobile tour of Central Europe for the *Figaro*. In 1912 published his first novel "Les Mémoires de Rat de Cave," followed by translations into French of Jack London, Daniel de Foë, O. Henry and others. During the war was Liaison Officer with the Indian and English armies (Croix de Guerre—Chevalier of the Legion of Honour). Speaks and writes several European languages. His best known books are "La Madone des Sleepings," "Prince ou Pitre," "Liaisons Tranquilles," "Hamydal le Philosophe," "Au Pays de Fox-trot."

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(*La Gondole aux Chimères*)

by

MAURICE DEKOBRA

Author of

"The Madonna of the Sleeping Cars"

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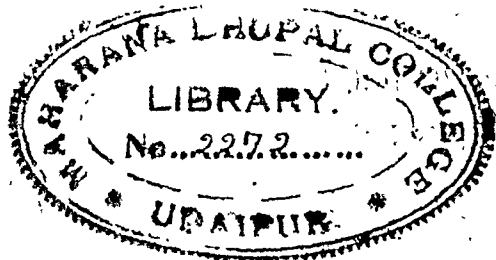
THE MADONNA OF THE
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III

THE PHANTOM GONDOLA

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N.B.—All names and characters in this novel are fictitious.

Chapter One

THE MADONNA IS BORED

A YOUNG man sat astride the stone balcony of the Rezzonico Palace, joyously kicking the parapet with the heels of his tennis shoes and whistling. Like a young blackbird imported from America, Jimmy Butterworth perched on the façade, a typical example of Yankee Irreverence, uncere- moniously pre-empting the majestic throne of the Queen of the Adriatic.

The evening breeze that ruffled the water of the Grand Canal tumbled Jimmy's thick blond hair and made the leaves of the oleanders rustle in their ultra-marine china pots. Below, a gondolier lounged along the water's edge, singing, the flat swan-neck of his gondola seeming to push its way with hesitation among the eddies.

Suddenly, Jimmy ducked behind his marble rail- ing, seized a bottle of soda and flung it furiously at the gondolier. The glass missile crashed against one of the brown pillars which bore the arms of Lady Diana Wynham. The boatman ceased sing- ing and gazed up angrily at the first storey of the palace. Jimmy raised his hands to his clean-shaven lips and shouted through them :

"Shut up!! Ta gueule! Va in malora!"

This trilingual command was disregarded by the gondolier, who retaliated with three Venetian curses and resumed his song and his cruise.

At this point, Lady Diana rose from a chair by the window, cast a glance over the balustrade and asked, half severely, half amusedly :

"Well, Jimmy, what's the matter with you now?"

"Didn't you hear, Diana? '*Si, non ho piu banane*'? You needn't think that I came all the way from New York to hear 'Yes, we have no bananas'—that old Broadway chestnut! Isn't there a doge in Venice still, Diana? No? Well, those sports in watermelon hats down at the municipal building should pass a law to make the gondoliers keep up with the latest hits from the Follies and the *Jardin de ma sœur*!"

"Jimmy, you profane my beloved Venice!"

"Come now, little girl. Don't repeat all the nice phrases you've read in novels and all the verses scratched with oyster-forks in hotel albums about the poetry, the seduction, the atmosphere and the colour of the Pearl of the Lagoon. That's all apple sauce. Just because Robert Browning died in your palace in 1889 is no reason for taking that stuff so seriously. I know very well how proud you are of having a commemorative tablet on the palace wall, above the Rio San Barnaba, where you can read that footling verse:

" 'Open my heart and you will see
Graved inside of it: Italy!'

"But take it from me, that spaghetti-fed poet Browning loved Italy altogether too much. He disgusted other people with it. If I die some day in Venice, I shall tell my heirs to inscribe on a pink marble tombstone, for the special benefit of Mr. Gabriele d'Annunzio:

" 'Open my heart and graved within
You'll see this line: He loved good gin.' "

"Jimmy, your youth is your only possible excuse for your lack of feeling. A twenty-year-old American has no right even to speak of Venice without going down on his knees."

"All right, to-morrow I'll go and kneel down on the Academy Bridge. And I'll thank the Austrians for having had the inspiration to build an iron bridge in the very shadow of the Tintoretto and the Bordones. The charm of Venice, darling!—it's the chimney on the factory of Santa Elena; it's the railroad which connects the city with civilization; it's the web of telegraph wires which stretches across the lagoon; it's the gondolier in waterproof khaki, armed with his union tariff; it's the electric elevator which vomits the hurrying tourists and their kodaks upon the top of the Campanile; it's the motor launch that does eighteen knots on the Grand Canal, tearing holes in the placid water and scattering the mosquito larvæ into the neighbouring *rii*—that is the charm of Venice."

Lady Diana's little feet moved nervously between the rockers of her chair. She blew the rice paper from a straw into Jimmy's face, sipped a few drops of her cocktail and said with a grimace:

"You do nothing but make paradoxes, imbecile. You'd better take some bicarbonate of soda after dinner."

Jimmy scowled.

"I do what? Make paradoxes? Diana, I don't like to have you use scientific words that aren't current in our American colleges. Imagine a football player discussing paradoxes while the quarterback is giving signals!"

He unclasped his white-flannelled legs from the railings, stretched himself with his face contracted into a luxurious yawn and murmured:

"Gee!"

Suddenly his attention became fixed on a passing motor boat and he exclaimed:

"Diana, look at the Florelli on the way to expiate her last year's sins at San Zaccaria!"

Lady Diana, instantly curious, stood up:

"Are you sure? Is that Nina Florelli?"

"Absolutely—her black and mauve flag reminds me of an immodest bit of lingerie drying in the wind; also, I recognize her sailor; his head is like a sacristan's parboiled in holy water. I tell you she is on her way to confession. Little Count Navagero told me yesterday down at *Florian's* that she has taken up the faith with a vengeance ever since Commander Florelli married her. In the old days, Nina made moving pictures in Milan and love in Rome. She used to have a little apartment in the piazza di Spagna where one sat on Cordovan leather cushions inflated with hot air and smoked opium. Pneumatic comfort and the seventh heaven! Navagero even told me that Nina, coming home a little tight one night with two gay cavaliers she had picked up in a club in the via Sistina, threw open the windows, stretched out her arms and said:

"How can you blame me, my little dears, for having wanton ideas when from my room I can see both the *Obelisco della Trinità* and the *Colonna dell' Immacolata Concezione!*"

"Jimmy, that's in very bad taste!"

"Yes, Diana, but I never have been *comme il faut* since a day three years ago when I was thrown out of the Vatican. I was escorting Mrs. J. A. Butterworth, my mother, into the presence of the Pope. I had heard so many stories about the Pope's mules that I had sneaked in a pair of slippers hoping that His Holiness would be willing to let me have his historic pair as a souvenir and would keep mine instead. The idea was a flop. The cardinal on duty politely invited me to clear out along with my mules and my illusions. The next day the *Osservatore Romano* published a violent article on the bad manners of young Americans. I tell you, Diana, these people have no head for business. If the Pope were an American he would sell his worn-out mules to collectors,

at a tremendous price, and would use the profits for Catholic propaganda. I'm anything but an unbeliever, Diana, in fact, I respect *all* religions, but good God in Heaven! that is no reason for not using publicity for the benefit of Providence—You are Scotch, you don't know the meaning of publicity in your antiquated Highlands. But, in Massachusetts, we advertise the sermons on the eighteenth page of the papers between advertisements for soap and safety razors. We inform the faithful that the church is well heated and comfortable and that there are taxis at the door. The Sermon on the Mount was all very well in Galilee, long before Mr. Edison was born, but if Christ were to come back to preach his admirable moral system again he would speak through a megaphone and would sign three thousand postal cards a week. Give me another straw, Diana. The *seppioline* you made me eat to-day at the *Fenice* has given me a terrible thirst."

* * * * *

Lady Winifred Grace Christabel Diana Wynham had been living for three months in the Rezzonico Palace with Mr. Jimmy Butterworth of Boston. The famous Scotch lady, daughter of the Duke of Inverness and widow of Lord Wynham, former English Ambassador to Russia, was communing in physical accord and æsthetic disaccord with one of the youngest and most brilliant representatives of the dollar aristocracy. Jimmy, the only son of Mrs. Butterworth, sole heir to the fortune of John Adams Butterworth, the celluloid king—Jimmy, holder of the high-jump record at Mens Putrida College and Champion of Ignorance in the Stadium of Science and Art, was learning how to become a cosmopolitan gentleman under the tutelage of Lady Diana Wynham. He was giving this great British lady ten thousand dollars a month, not, perhaps,

literally to find out that one does not suck the water from finger-bowls with a straw, but at least to learn the distinction between the coronet of a prince of the blood and that of a prince of the Holy Roman Empire, how to find his way about in the maze of the Almanach de Gotha and how to kiss the hand of a noblewoman in the correct manner.

An unusual alliance! This woman, whose ancestors were Scotch kings, was selling her science of good breeding and worldliness to this boy whose ancestors were emigrants. The end of an ancient stock on which Fate had grafted the young shoot of a new line! A most charming mentor, this titled lady, clothed in the Place Vendôme, coiffed in the rue Royale, who now guided the first steps of this athletic, smooth-shaven, uncouth Telemachus.

They had first met at Lake Garda, where Lady Diana had gone to rid herself of her ennui in shady lanes buried under the white confetti of blossoming acacias.

The memory of her adventure with Prince Séliman had gradually died away. The drama of Glensloy Castle had faded into the autumn mists which hung over Loch Lomond. Lady Diana no longer wept for her still-born hopes. For three years she had wandered aimlessly among the resorts of the Mediterranean. She had been seen praying on the Acropolis, not in the shadow of Pallas Athena, but at the altar of Good Fortune which gives beautiful, but solitary, women the solace of a mad love-affair, or a large deposit at the Bankers' Trust. She had been observed at Biskra, a nymph ambushed in the ocean of palms. She had appeared in the *souks* of Tunis, indifferent to the supplications of the rug merchants. She had dipped lightly into an adventure, quickly broken off, with a captain of Spahis at Marrakech and had whiled away a stormy evening at Palermo with a pearl merchant

from Salonica. But these motifs of fantasy, embroidered on the canvas of her bitter pleasures had failed to satisfy her troubled soul. The lady known as the Madonna of the Sleeping Cars was still travelling at random over an indifferent track.

She had found distraction in Jimmy as we sometimes find amusement in the Zoo, watching the antics of a young seal or the somersaults of a newly captured opossum. This happy-go-lucky biped, trapped on the plains of Massachusetts to be caged up suddenly among the puerile customs of the European smart set, had diverted Lady Diana with his gambols along the flower beds of etiquette. The juvenile crudity of his conversation, his reckless audacity, his unbounded pride in being an American citizen—all these things provided the blue-blooded Scotch lady with a series of daily surprises. One evening, rowing on the moon-lit Lake Garda, Jimmy had suddenly dropped the oars, actually bounded upon Lady Diana and, wrapping his strong arms about her bare white shoulders, had exclaimed joyfully :

"No kidding, you're a knock-out! Oh, my God, Diana!"

Lady Diana had not protested, because the boat was unsteady and because this unrhetorical collegiate enthusiasm did not wholly displease her. She had gently avoided Jimmy's searching lips and had remarked ironically :

"Little boy, you have about as much tact as a buffalo!"

And Jimmy had replied, calling on the stars to witness his sincerity :

"Diana! Diana! I tell you, you are irresistible with your profile like the Holy Virgin's and those tired eyes of the Fatal Woman. If you had ever shown the tip of your nose over the walls of Mens Putrida you would have given us all bad dreams for a month. That's a fact. Lord, but you're

beautiful! I adore the blue of your eyes. It makes me think of the tiles in mother's bathroom. And your legs—I caught a glimpse above the top of your stocking when you climbed into the boat. Gosh! If Romeo had ever seen what *I* have, he'd have broken all records on his rope-ladder!"

Such had been the prologue to the liaison between Mr. Jimmy Butterworth and Lady Diana Wynham in the poetic setting of the half moon-lit, half shadowy Lake Garda. A month later they were installed in the Rezzonico Palace in Venice.

Jimmy was as yet unacquainted with Her Serene Highness of the Adriatic. His European tour had included London, Berlin, Paris and Rome. But, as he had admitted to Lady Diana:

"You know, sweetie, all Venice needs is a baby like you to give it a little pep. Now that I have you, to hell with gondolas and beautiful thoughts in front of Saint Mark's lion-cage!"

Jimmy Butterworth, who had heard of the lion of Saint Mark's in America, actually thought that it was a live beast imported from Abyssinia on a Lloyd-Triestino boat. American sportsmen no longer mistake the Piræus for a man, but it sometimes happens that they think Saint Mark a lion tamer.

Lady Diana would have preferred the Vendramin-Calergi Palace, sanctified in the eyes of music lovers by Richard Wagner's death. But, finding it impossible to rent the sanctuary where Wotan's sceptre was broken in 1883, she had chosen the Rezzonico.

In the seventeenth century the Rezzonico family had offered a hundred thousand ducats to the Republic in order to gain admission to the nobility. Lady Diana, in her turn, had offered a hundred and fifty thousand lire to Mr. Hierschell de Minerbi to rent his magnificent palace. The seventeen long windows with Roman arches flanked by Corinthian

columns, the Virgin with the stiff little smile, guarding beneath her stone parasol the entrance to the little garden, the inner court paved with moss-grown stones, the marble staircase bathing in the green water of the Grand Canal before the five worm-eaten fingers of the mooring poles—these were the things which had drawn Lady Diana to the Rezzonico Palace.

And so it was that one day in May she moved into the *palazzo*, accompanied by General Liang-Tse, her Pekingese dog, sixteen innovation trunks armoured like a torpedo boat, thirty hat boxes covered with *toile de Jouy* in periwinkle blue, a crate full of Murano glass—iridescent goblets, lovely shells of spun glass, elaborately ornamented vases and beautifully shaped chalices—, a tremendous English-Latin lexicon, a book on China from *Das Tanzende Ich* of Maria Ley, and a copy of *The Dictionary of Cocktails*, edited surreptitiously in Boston by an apostate epicure discharged from the staff of the Salvation Army.

Jimmy Butterworth's baggage consisted solely of a small steamer trunk, flat as a table drawer, containing two dinner jackets, twelve shirts, a tennis racquet, a picture of his mother, an explanatory pamphlet on venereal diseases, a cup won at Mens Putrida College and a cheque book. He also brought with him a young monkey which he had purchased on his way through Verona. Lady Diana had baptized the beast Othello because his facial expression was so like that of a jealous husband.

Lady Diana did not really love Jimmy. She tolerated him in much the same way that a mother cat absent-mindedly allows a kitten already weaned still to suckle her—as a matter of indifferent habit. She deigned to accept his attentions because she did not want to be bothered to converse with this Prince of Wales of Celluloid, but she by

no means gave herself up to his clumsy kisses. It took more than that to captivate the heart and satisfy the senses of the beautiful Scotchwoman. To thrill her, more expert handling was required than that of Mr. Butterworth, Jr., who had only reached the stage of employing in his love-making the ring tactics of a Carpentier. Don Juan did not play the *Polka des Moineaux* with one finger on the harpsichord of eclectic voluptuousness.

On the evening in question, Jimmy, having departed with two college friends to consume gin fizzes at the *Danieli* bar, Lady Diana ordered Beppo, her gondolier, to pilot her along by San Michele. It was after midnight. A new moon poured its silver light over the pointed tops of the campaniles and dappled with opalescent reflections the City of Marble and Water. The fresh evening breeze carried from the Lido the salt air of the Adriatic. Venice was beginning to nod a sleepy head. The wash from the last of the small steamers rustled along the deserted docks and the dome of Santa Maria della Salute shone like a jewel in the blue gleam of the sleepless night.

Lady Diana, swathed in a mink wrap, lay on a bear skin spread on the bottom of her gondola, which was beautifully ornamented with gold. Regardless of the old edicts of the Senate, which at one time restricted the magnificence of the patricians' boats, Lady Diana had had her gondola painted the deep purple of the amaranth and decorated with two bronze chimeras, vomiting fire, wings spread to the wind.

She smoked one cigarette after another, her beautiful face turned toward the *faro* fixed on the bow—a miniature reproduction of the gigantic lantern on Morosini's galley. Forgetting that she was no longer rich beyond belief, she drank in, like a re-incarnated *dogaressa*, the fascinating poison of old Venice.

Beppo navigated noiselessly, timing precisely the *pizzicati* of the drops which fell from his lifted oar. Lady Diana shivered as they passed below the cool dampness of the arch of the Rialto where the stones cry out day and night against the sacrilege of desecration by the smoke of progress.

The gondola glided by the Cà d'Oro, that marvellous folly of old Contarini, the Cà d'Oro where the moon threw its cold light and brought out the marvellous intricacy of the marble façade. Lady Diana ordered Beppo to turn about so that she might admire that unique toy, that bit of lace petrified by the centuries, which mirrored its motifs and its capitals, its interlacings and its arcades in the moving waters of the Grand Canal.

The gondola wound its way into the rio of the Apostles. On the right, black walls with windows like tight-shut eyes; on the left, stone façades, mottled by the moon, with here and there the shining eye of a night lamp or the blinking light from a loggia. Beppo leaned low as they passed under the arch of a little bridge. A woman, shrouded in a black shawl, stole along the narrow quay and disappeared, a silent shadow drawn in by the breath of a black alley. The boat slid past two old gondolas moored to a worm-eaten wooden staircase; two shabby old gondolas with rusted prows, like two faded wrinkled *belles*, worn, decrepit, nodding their heads together, discussing their former glory which had for ever died in the heroic days of Daniel Manin and Tomaseo.

The purple gondola slid noiselessly along the edge of a mysterious garden where the petals of the flowers seemed to exhale sighs on the soft breeze, and slowly made its way to the Jesuit convent; then, suddenly, it was out on the great expanse of the open lagoon where the water lapped gently at the feet of the *Fondamenta Nuova*.

"Go around San Michele," said Lady Diana to the gondolier.

Moving faster now, Beppo headed toward the cemetery island consolingly surrounded by its wall of pink brick. The chapel stood amidst a cluster of cypress trees, black torches watching over the repose of the dead. The silence of the sleeping lagoon brought a mood of peaceful exaltation to Lady Diana. She was happy to be relieved of Jimmy's incessant chatter and the twang of his transatlantic slang, which so often interrupted the charm of meditation or broke the thread of a brooding memory.

Lady Diana closed her eyes. This peaceful promenade by San Michele somehow made her shudder. This proximity to annihilation made her tremble. A series of rapid shivers passed over the pale velvet of her skin. She contemplated her own past, mentally exploring the labyrinth of her past happiness and dipping into the necropolis of pleasures dead and gone. Her lovers followed one another across her memory, like so many figures embroidered on a cloth. She counted out the more important ones in cadence with the oars of the gondolier.

First—Lord Wynham, her husband! Her uningratiating initiator into love, now buried in a cold and foggy chapel in Essex. Second, Lord Beverly Kinmetcott, a replica of Franz Hals's "Laughing Cavalier," champion polo-player and noted narrator of risqué stories over the dessert. Third, the Duke de Massignac, Secretary to the French Embassy. An Alfred de Vigny, dressed in gabardine and wreathed with flowery words, French love, dramatic nights and savage dialogues. Fourth, George Wobbly, the burlesque comedian of the Empire Theatre. Contrast, sceptical kisses and pirouettes on the Map of Tenderness. Fifth, Mr. Somerset Wifle, Member of Parliament. A railroad accident, a sleeping car and a *billet-doux*.

Banco by Berth No. 10. Answered by Berth No. 9. Sixth, Leo Tito, dancer at the *Ambassadors*. A woman's vengeance to humiliate Dorothy Hobson, his partner. Anxious love that, with one hand on the pearl necklace. Seventh, a sailor on an evening of boredom. Eighth, a boxer, an evening of gin. Ninth, an unknown. Ninth, No. 2, an English officer to expiate the unknown. A necktie and a Gourkha's knife on the divan. Tenth, a captain of Spahis in a Moorish villa. A brief idyll. Disappointing embraces. The bit in the teeth and a hurdle down. Eleventh, Mr. Achilles Skopelos, a Levantine. Suppleness of a cat and *confiture* of roses. Twelfth, Jimmy Butterworth.

Lady Diana stopped counting as the gondolier turned to the right, toward the Marani Passage. Would she, too, turn another page? That white page at the top of which, after the dozen gone before, Destiny would write a new name?

Lady Diana sighed. She wrapped her fur more tightly about her neck and murmured:

"Number Thirteen! Number Thirteen!"

She was not superstitious, but the significance of the number worried her. She wanted Number Thirteen to eclipse all the others and to be a superb climax to the romance of her Loves. She was already anticipating the Great Adventure of all her life, with the predestined Lover. She was sorting out, in advance, the joys and the sufferings which this consuming passion would sow in her heart. For a long time, as the gondola moved at will she nursed the tumultuous symphony of her secret hopes. Then, with a sudden attack of trembling, she cast this reverie from her mind.

She smoked another cigarette to bring herself back to reality and reproached herself for having woven such hopeless romance. It was the charm of Venice that had intoxicated her. Striving for a real reaction, she evoked the remark of an Austrian

who had said to her one evening at *Schoener's* in Vienna :

"In Venice, the gondolas don't float on the water, but on the 'saliva of lovers who have whispered sweet nothings there for a thousand years!'"

The barque glided by the public garden and entered the stretch of water before Saint Mark's. The quay of the Esclavons was deserted. Here and there lights shone from the walls of the low houses ; others pointed the way to the Lido. The radiance from the *piazzetta* and the huge pale-pink wall of the Palace of the Doges, standing on its double row of shadowy columns, reminded Lady Diana that Jimmy was, doubtless, close by at *Danieli's* with his college friends. She went on, however, without bothering to stop for him.

It was half-past one in the morning when the gondola passed between the brown mooring poles and came to rest at the foot of the state stairway. Lady Diana sprang to the marble steps—green with seaweed—dismissed Beppo and went directly to her room without asking whether Jimmy had returned home.

As she drank a glass of ice-water, she noticed on her desk in the onyx bowl where she was accustomed to find the *New York Herald* and the *Daily Mail* each morning, a copy of the *Gazetta di Venezia*. She glanced at it and was instantly interested in the headline :

"ASSASSINATION OF LORD STANLEY. INSURRECTION IN CAIRO"

The colonial affairs of her country held no particular interest for her, but she had known Lord Stanley in the days when her husband took her to diplomatic receptions at the Court of St. James'. The assassination of this high official was serious news. She read the dispatch with interest :

"Cairo, June 20th. An Egyptian fanatic whose name is not known, stabbed Lord Stanley this morning while he presided over the unveiling of Lord Kitchener's statue. The murderer was arrested. This political crime appears to be the first sign of concerted action on the part of certain Egyptian Nationalists, for it is a known fact that all communication with Khartoum is cut off and that the English garrison there is besieged by several thousand insurgents."

Lady Diana laid the paper on the desk and gave several minutes to the thought of the victim of this Egyptian patriot. Then, as Egypt and its destiny held little interest for her, she undressed and lit a last cigarette.

In white silk pyjamas with the Scotch thistle embroidered on the left breast and mules of silver brocade, she sat with her elbow on the window sill. The Grand Canal slept peacefully, the moon had disappeared and darkness had invaded the little square of San Samuele which lay opposite the *palazzo*. Once again Lady Diana was haunted by the balance sheet in the volume of her passions and by Number Thirteen. Was it possible that pure chance, which plays such havoc with the great events of our lives, was about to link this tragedy in Cairo with her unsatisfied desire?

Chapter Two

A RAY OF LIGHT INVADES THE BOREDOM

EMMA, Lady Diana's Swiss maid, awakened her mistress at ten o'clock. She was rather more a companion than a servant, for Lady Diana trusted her implicitly and frequently confided to her both her trivial secrets and her most important plans. Emma brought the breakfast on a tray of bottle-green glass which she carried with all the ceremony of a priest handling the relics of a saint. There was tea in an antique pot from Faenza, orange marmalade imported from Dundee, and dry biscuits from Félix Potin, in Paris. There was also a letter, bearing no stamp and sealed with the arms of a patrician. Emma announced :

"Milady, the gondolier just brought this urgent letter from the Countess Orseolo."

Lady Diana knew the dowager, who lived in the neighbouring palace, only by sight. She read the letter, half aloud :

"Lady Wynham, I am certain that you will not be offended when I tell you of the great suffering of my Siamese cat, Bettina, which won the first prize last year at the Turin Exposition. When I came home last evening, I found Mr. Butterworth's monkey beside her in an attitude which left no doubt whatever as to his intentions. The impetuous beast had every idea of carrying on the line of his ancestors with the aid of my poor little cat. I had the greatest difficulty in avoiding a deplorable catastrophe. Consequently, Lady Wynham, I would be more than grateful if you could manage to turn the ardour of that very passionate monkey in other directions. Please believe me,

"Yours regretfully but sincerely,

THIS BOOK MUST BE RETURNED ON
OR BEFORE THE DATE LAST
SPECIFIED BELOW.

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Lady Diana was amused, but being in the mood to pick a quarrel with Jimmy, she asked Emma :

"Has Mr. Butterworth come in?"

"Oh, yes, Milady, at three o'clock this morning. The gentlemen are only just awake."

"What? The *gentlemen*?"

"Yes, Milady. Mr. Butterworth brought two American friends back with him. One is in the bed, another is on the *chaise longue*, and Mr. Butterworth has made himself comfortable on a heap of cushions which he took from Milady's boudoir."

"What!"

"Yes. I have just served their breakfast : porridge, bacon and eggs, fried smelt, corn bread, griddle cakes with maple syrup, China tea and brandy."

Lady Diana, thoroughly annoyed by this time, sat up in bed :

"Send Mr. Butterworth here immediately."

Left alone, she pounded her pillows furiously and murmured in French :

"*Ce 'dgigollo' devient insupportable!*"

Mr. Jimmy Butterworth appeared. His hair was in disorder and he wore an orange dressing-gown fit for a boxer in training.

"Hello, Diana!" he called out. "How's my little sugar-baby?"

Lady Diana's look halted his spring at the edge of the bed.

"I am informed that you brought two strange men into my palace last night," she said coldly.

"Why not? Bob Mitchell and Freddy Whichmott—classmates of mine at Mens Putrida."

"Are you by any chance labouring under the impression that my palace is a boarding-house?"

"Oh, Diana, be reasonable! You have room enough here to put up a regiment of infantry."

"Is that any reason for bringing in two men whom I have never even seen? Really, my dear, you are still a long way from a proper understanding of the simplest conventions, and I must tell you frankly that your clownish behaviour is getting badly on my nerves. Here is something else—read this letter. The Countess Orseolo, my neighbour, is complaining about the incongruities of your monkey. It puts me in a charming position!"

Jimmy read the note. He burst out laughing and remarked:

"*Bettina Dishonoured, or The Loves of Othello!* What a wonderful scoop for the comic supplement of the Hearst papers. Diana, you must admit it's damned funny! Just imagine—Othello making amorous advances to old Orseolo's cat! I would have paid twenty dollars for a ringside seat at that match!"

"That is neither here nor there. The facts are that the dowager is very much annoyed and that your monkey is making me appear ridiculous!"

"That's all right, Diana. The dowager will come just the same to the big party you are giving on the night of the Redemption."

"What big party?"

"Listen to me, darling. I have just discovered that they always have a fête in Venice on the eighteenth of July to celebrate the end of a frightful plague which ravaged all Venetia in—I can't remember what year. On that night, the whole city is turned completely upside down. So, while I was drinking your health with my American friends and some Venetians of noble birth at the *Danieli* bar, I had a great idea. We have decided to make you a *dogaressa!*"

"A *dogaressa?*"

"Certainly! Hot stuff, don't you think? We had all the best-looking representatives of the younger set with us last night. There was the

great Barbarigo who had two doges among his ancestors and who now works for his living in the Stucky mills, and Count Erizzo, the famous aviator who brought down several Austrians in the war. There was also Foscarini and, believe me, he's a handsome devil. You know the man I mean—the fellow with a profile like a Roman Senator, who threw you a rose last week as your gondola passed under the Paille Bridge. There were others I scarcely know, friends of my friends. Commander Lorenzetti, Tradeletto and Colonel Ceresole. Regular guys, darling, every one of them! No! No! let me finish, Diana. They all know you and they all admire you. Your adventure with Prince Séliman and the tragedy in your Scotch castle—well, that's enough for any red-blooded Venetian. They consider you the most beautiful and the rarest flower in the great garden of international women. They approved heartily of my suggestion and they all declared that you were worthy of being a *dogressa*. It's great, Diana! Naturally, I intend to pay for everything and it's going to be some brawl! The whipped-cream of all Venice in your *salons* and twelve hundred gondolas bumping each other in the Grand Canal! After the fireworks of the Giudecca, you will be crowned. By the way, you must wire to Paris immediately for a cloak of royal purple and ermine. It's up to you to re-establish the glory of Venice. You understand, darling? The master of ceremonies, an old bird weighted down with medals and masked with wrinkles, will perform the necessary rites while you select from the crowd anyone you please to be the doge. Of course, I don't count—I belong to the Council of Ten—the Ten Thousand Dollars which I intend to spend on lemonade, lights, music and supper!"

Lady Diana listened to Jimmy with much interest and was both surprised and disarmed. How

could she be angry with this ill-bred spoiled child who continually mixed, in a most astonishing confusion, inexcusable errors and *beaux gestes*. She allowed Jimmy to kiss her and exclaimed amusedly :

"How foolish you are, my little Jimmy! I, a *dogaressa*! Why, it's perfectly absurd! I should never have conceived anything so idiotic!"

"No more would I if Whichmott hadn't put the idea into my head. He was telling me that you reminded him of the Saint Catherine in the Ducal Palace. You know, they celebrated her mystic marriage in the presence of the Doge Francesco Donato. Between that remark and making you a *dogaressa* was only one more gin-fizz.

"The first thing to do is to draw up a provisory list of the people to be invited. That will be lots of fun. We'll mix up the blue-bloods and the *nouveaux-riches*, the authentic patricians of the thirteenth century and the V.S.A.C.'s of the twentieth!"

"What are the V.S.A.C.'s?"

"Why, Barbarigo explained it to me. It is the abbreviation for the Venetian Society of Apprentice Counts. In addition to that, we will take in the Smart Set of the Excelsior Palace so that the Lido sun won't be forgotten. By the way, we mustn't overlook Mrs. Wantmore. I saw her last evening with Trimbitt, the Labour leader, and Lord Montagu Batsman. A Labour leader loafing in a gondola in Venice at the expense of the Manchester workmen! It's wonderful!"

Lady Diana evinced her surprise :

"What! Is she here?"

"Yes, my love, in flesh and in venom. I had a chat with her. Laugh that off! As usual, she explained that all Americans were stupid, ill-bred and egotistical. In self-defence, I told her a story. I'll bet you've never heard it. A lady was visiting the

famous frigate which Nelson commanded at Trafalgar. The officers showed her a large bronze plate set in the deck and said: 'Madam, this marks the spot where Nelson fell during the battle.' With that the lady answered simply: 'I don't see anything remarkable about that. I almost broke my own neck a minute ago!' Mrs. Wantmore admitted the story was funny and exclaimed: 'Of course, it was an American!' 'No, Madam,' I replied gracefully, 'the lady was Mrs. B——, your best friend.' "

Jimmy nibbled a biscuit purloined from the bottle-green tray and asked:

"Now, Diana, whom are you going to choose as Doge?"

Lady Diana made an evasive gesture that freed a white arm from her pyjama sleeve.

"We shall see."

"Well, I happen to know that you have at the minute three devoted swains who would like nothing better than to pull me off my throne."

"Never mind about them, Jimmy."

"Well, then, is it going to be Henri de Mantignac, Sir Reginald Duckling, or Mr. Erich Krause? Has the Frenchman a better chance than the English diplomat? Or is the Prussian business man going to win the prize?"

"I have not decided. I have invited all three of them for dinner this evening at *Montin's*. Perhaps between the dessert and the cheese I shall come to some conclusion. In any case, Jimmy, you can have the evening off. Amuse yourself with your friends. Meantime I shall do a little prospecting of souls around the dinner table and draw comparisons from the respective reactions of my three suitors to the acid drops of my provocation."

Montin's is the most famous restaurant in the neighbourhood of San Trovaso. Beneath the arbours of the garden the Bohemian element of

dividuals, is becoming ferocious among nations. Consequently, any League of Nations which appeals to the better sentiments of a people and threatens them with platonic theories, is as ridiculous as a baby playing in the midst of a pack of famished wolves."

"You frighten me, Erich!"

"Don't take it that way, my dear friend. I'm only trying to point out to you that were you not involuntarily swayed by a lot of Utopians, pacifists, and other torch-bearers who look at humanity as something which it never was and never will be, you would see the facts of the case. It is an unfortunate thing that a number of pretentious weaklings just out of the universities and a few clever prodigies escaped from grammar-school should be allowed to talk so solemnly about world peace, and to intoxicate their susceptible readers with empty words, agreeable phrases and edenistic dreams. They are either irresponsible nobodies or cheap comedians."

"I gather, then, that aside from the Egyptian insurrection, you anticipate other international conflicts?"

The German drew himself up and went on:

"Conflicts, you say! But you already have them with your allies of yesterday!"

Mantignac and Duckling looked at one another and the Frenchman said smilingly:

"I can only imagine one and that would be for the conquest of Lady Wynham's heart."

"No! No!" Erich Krause was talking seriously now. "Debts! War debts! Everyone knows that the debtor is never in love with his creditor. The Americans, who are literally clothed in European gold, Uncle Sam the real gainer by the war, Uncle Sam whose tremendous bill we are now paying, Uncle Sam, a resuscitated Shylock, will one day be obliged to open his safe when he finds it neces-

sary to call out his militia and to prepare his fleets for the inevitable battle in the Pacific. Then it will be our turn—the turn of all of us broken-down relics of old Europe, former controllers of the treasure which is now in America, to enrich ourselves at the expense of the nation three thousand miles away. We shall be selling *them*, at profiteering prices, ammunitions or beef, while they are fighting it out with the yellow races and learning the cost of checking the expansion of a horde of exasperated Japanese.”

“What an implacable conception of the future you have, *Herr Doktor!*” Mantignac remarked. “One might gather from your tone that you get some personal satisfaction from your apocalyptic prophecies.”

The Prussian threw out his athletic chest still farther and declared :

“No, I get no personal satisfaction. But you know as well as I do that Prussia is not the country where one lives on dreams. All the men of importance in our governmental circles have, sooner or later, entered *Realpolitiker*. You understand the exact meaning of that word. In our arid plains extending from the Vistula to the Elbe, on our barren soil, we have learned how to fight face to face with reality. On the other hand, you Latins taste the sweetness of living under clement skies and you turn away only too quickly when Fate darkens the horizon with black clouds. In a word, we Prussians are the spiritual sons of Hegel.”

Monsieur de Mantignac bowed his head.

“What answer can I make, *Herr Doktor?* How can I argue against the logic of your remarks? Perhaps you are the sons of Hegel, but at least we are the sons of Samson. Delilah made us tear down the temple to crush the Philistines and all we received was bricks on the head. Unfortunately,

Delilah has long teeth and an English accent. If the Anglo-Saxons were not lacking in the smallest element of imagination and in all psychological science, they would not sow discord in the nation which has been as much the victim of its allies as of its enemies. One does not send a bill-collector to knock at the door of the mausoleum which contains the remains of fifteen hundred thousand men—above all, when those same men died while their future creditors were enriching themselves by selling them arms for their own eventual benefit.”

“Don’t get excited, Mantignac!” Duckling interrupted. “Ten years from to-day you won’t be receiving a solitary mark from the Germans and we won’t be banking any francs from the French Treasury. The Dawes Plan and the general agreement on war debts will amount to so much wrapping-paper!”

Lady Diana laid her hand on Duckling’s arm :

“But what about you, Reggie, whose spiritual son are you?”

“Mercury’s, my dear—by that I mean the god of Commerce.”

“And the god of Thieves, also?”

“Have it that way, if you will, Diana, since commerce is to theft what muscle is to bone. Do you expect a nation of shopkeepers to have any greater ideal than to kneel down before the altar of Trade?”

Mantignac agreed :

“Sir Reginald is right and since we’re talking hard facts, I might recall to him that, for his compatriots, gold means more than blood. They proved that between 1914 and 1918.”

Lady Diana raised the brows over her beautiful eyes and asked :

“Exactly how?”

“The Great War would not have lasted a year had not the United Kingdom indirectly nourished

the enemy through the channel of neutral nations. But a choice had to be made. Paralyzed commerce and brief hostilities—or prosperous traffic of merchandise and a long war. Have you ever considered that, Lady Diana? Has it ever occurred to you that Mr. Brown, an English manufacturer, made millions selling cotton to Holland and to Sweden and that all that cotton eventually reached Germany? Then Brown, the son, who was a soldier at the front, ended by being killed by his father's own customers. What a dramatic and a delightful experience for a modern business man! Five hundred per cent net or my son's neck!"

Sir Reginald Duckling laughed cynically:

"That's just what I told you a little while ago, Lady Diana. Our countrymen never hesitated for a second. They massacred their own children on the very steps of the Stock Exchange. Business is business."

"Reginald, your cynicism sends shivers down my spine."

"You wouldn't expect reality to be pleasant, would you?" Mantignac asked. "Optimism is the diabetes of credulous minds that makes sugar out of human defects. The most exasperating thing in the world is the frightful hypocrisy of civilized people. In an effort to trick themselves, they pretend to speculate on the nobility and the grandeur of the souls of individuals, and they disguise beneath the cloak of altruism the treachery which leads them on. You are soon going to see the English operating in Egypt. There will be a rain of bullets on the *fellahs*. That will teach them to want to be happy without the permission of the Colonial Office! The Nationalists in Cairo will cry out for help to the entire world and the world in turn will weep crocodile tears, and Soviet gold will encourage the sons of Ptolemy to resist and carry on."

Monsieur de Mantignac's comments were interrupted by the arrival of a fakir who laid on the table a prospectus translated into three languages and expatiating on his ability to look into the future.

"Call him," suggested Lady Diana. "I adore these fortune tellers because they never by any chance say one word of truth. Nevertheless, I suppose everyone at some time or other has met a Bohemian or a somnambulist who has prophesied astounding things."

The fakir bowed to Lady Diana. He bore the Hindu name of Hananâti, but Sir Reginald suspected him of having been born near Jaffa.

"Do you read hands?" Lady Diana asked the thaumaturgist.

He replied discreetly :

"No, Madame. One can never depend on the hand. But have you some object which you always carry with you?"

Lady Diana passed him her wedding ring. Hananâti rubbed it between his two shrivelled palms and seemed to go into a deep trance. Then, standing behind Lady Diana, he murmured :

"I can see you in the sand dunes at the base of the pyramids."

"And then what?"

"Nothing more."

Mantignac remarked sarcastically :

"Evidently you don't take long flights into the Great Beyond."

"I only saw Madame among the *tarboosh*, with the pyramids and the Sphinx on the horizon. I can say no more than that."

"Give him ten lire. That's all he's worth."

The fakir wandered away. Lady Diana leaned toward Sir Reginald and remarked :

"Nevertheless, that's very strange. Before he came to the table we were talking of the revolution

in Egypt, and last night I was thinking about poor Lord Stanley."

"A mere coincidence."

"Of course it is! And the more particularly because I have no earthly reason for going to wander along the banks of the Nile."

Dinner was over. Lady Diana and her faithful escorts left the restaurant and walked to the Guidecca Canal where Beppo was waiting for them in the gondola of the chimeras. The German seated himself on the right, the Englishman on the left, the Frenchman at Lady Diana's feet.

"My little friends," she joked, "we have earned the right to speak of lighter things after our dark meditations on the future of the human race. Let me ask you all a question. Were I to crown one of you doge at the party which I am giving on Redemption Night, would the other two be jealous?"

"Oh," exclaimed Mantignac, "now we are getting to the square of the hypotenuse of gallant geometry. Jealousy has caused a lot of ink to flow, my dear!"

"To say nothing of tears," Duckling murmured.

"And blows!" Krause added. "Jealousy being the direct complement of love in the same way that thunder is the complement of lightning, the wise man attaches a lightning-rod to his heart."

"Jealousy is the homage paid by the jealous man to the woman he loves," Duckling affirmed.

And Lady Diana replied:

"May the good Lord in Heaven preserve me from a homage which resembles a bunch of nettles. And yet, my dear Reggie, I do think that you are enough of an altruist not to be disgruntled at the sight of someone else's happiness."

"So they say! As a matter of fact, other people's happiness is like the spicy aroma of a good roast: we can stand it, once we have eaten our fill."

Lady Diana dipped her finger in the black water.

"For me," she said, "to be jealous is to manifest a proprietary instinct. Certain people never admit that other people are in the habit of taking out mortgages on the personalities of those whom they possess."

During this airy conversation, Beppo had taken the rio della Salute which passes by the church of the Santa Maria. The gondola was just turning into the Grand Canal, when a powerful motor boat passed, throwing out spray on each side. This automobile boat was piloted by a man in a brown felt hat, a khaki raincoat and chamois gloves. The smartly-dressed pilot saw the gondola just in time not to hit it, but too late to avoid drenching it with spray. Holding the wheel with his left hand and quickly removing his hat with his right, he called to Lady Diana in Italian :

"Madam, I beg a thousand pardons!"

Then the white hull of his boat was quickly swallowed up in the darkness, and the occupants of the gondola were left with no proof of its existence save the water on their coats and the movement of the choppy waves left in its wake.

Beppo swore. Sir Reginald exclaimed :

"What an idiot. He might have wrecked your gondola!"

Krause added :

"Those eighty horse-power motors should be forbidden. Venice was never made for these wild men who like to travel about at twenty-two knots an hour, sapping the foundations of the palaces with the incessant disturbance of the water."

Mantignac was looking at Lady Diana. She seemed not at all annoyed by this unexpected incident. Her eyes still sought to pierce the darkness in which the launch had disappeared like a white meteor, headed towards Saint Mark's.

"Are you thinking about the man who seemed

in such a hurry, at the wheel of his phantom boat?" Mantignac asked in a whisper.

Evidently he had read Lady Diana's thoughts, because she made an impatient gesture and, addressing the gondolier, said:

"Beppo, what boat is that? Did you get a good look at it?"

"Oh, yes, *Signora*, I know it by sight. It is called the *Beatrice* and is always anchored near the Yacht Club."

"Who is the owner?"

"I don't know, *Signora*."

"All right, take us to the *palazzo* as quickly as possible."

In a few minutes the gondola arrived. Lady Diana jumped to the steps and said:

"Forgive me, my dear friends, I am not feeling very well. I shall go indoors. Beppo will take you wherever you want to go. Good night."

She did not wait to hear the farewells of her three admirers. Quickly crossing the inner courtyard of her palace, she went up to her room and rang for Emma.

"Is Mr. Butterworth in?"

"Yes, *Milady*. Mr. Butterworth is very busy shaving Othello."

Lady Diana hurried into the library and found Jimmy armed with a safety razor, a shaving stick and brush, holding Othello between his knees.

"Oh, Diana," he cried out joyfully. "Back so soon? You're just in time. You can help me hold this damned animal while I give him a face like a young leading man from Drury Lane."

Lady Diana, thoroughly disgusted, seized the shaving stick and brush to throw them from the window.

"I am sick and tired of your animal, my dear," she exclaimed. "Really, you have about as much intelligence as a stuffed setter. Listen to me—

minutes, seconds, are precious. Have you ever seen a very powerful motor boat known as the *Beatrice*?"

"No."

"Never mind. Get into my launch and see if you can find a white boat that has a triangular flag marked with a star at the prow. I want to know the name of the man who was driving it this evening at eleven o'clock and almost collided with my gondola at the corner of the rio della Salute. You understand, Jimmy?"

"What do you want to do—come to an understanding with that idiot?"

"Yes."

"Count on me. If I can find him I'll smash him in the jaw in just about the time it takes to drink a Martini."

"You'll do nothing of the sort. I'll teach him manners. All that I want to know is his name and address. He was headed in the direction of Saint Mark's. Explore the pier. Go as far as the Lido if you have to. It's just possible that he may have tied up at the Excelsior dock. Whatever you do, Jimmy, don't come back until you've found out what I want to know."

Jimmy had a thousand faults, but no one could contend that he was not an obliging lover. He pushed Othello, still covered with shaving soap, into his cage, seized his overcoat and ran down the marble staircase with the speed of an Olympic champion. A second later, he had loosed the mooring rope of the *Triton* and refused the assistance of the mechanic who offered to go with him.

"If you're going to the Lido, sir, look out for the Orfanello Passage. The dead lagoon is on the right. Be very careful to follow the route which is marked out."

"Don't you worry. Have I plenty of gasoline?"

"Yes, sir, are you going very far?"

“To Trieste, if necessary. Shove off.”

The motor whirred. The propeller churned the black water angrily. The *Triton* bounded forward in the direction of the Academia Bridge.

Lady Diana, leaning out of her darkened bedroom, watched Jimmy disappear. She was less interested in the motor boat and its pilot than in the task which lay before the two. She wanted to find the man with the profile of a Roman nobleman, whose mellow voice coming to her through the night had made vibrate in her subconscious self the prophetic echo of an unvoiced hope.

Chapter Three

THE LIGHT BECOMES A FLICKERING FLAME

LADY DIANA was stretched out on her bed, with its over-ornamental columns like the writhing limbs of a tormented animal. The coverlet of royal blue velvet embroidered with silver still lay on the bed. Lady Diana had not undressed. The windows, open on the clear night, allowed a quiet light to penetrate the shadows of her room. One could see the principal outlines of the painting by Palma Vecchio on the gilt console table and the *bibelots* gleaming behind the glass of the Louis XIV cabinet.

It was four o'clock in the morning. Jimmie had not yet returned. Lady Diana curbed her impatience and tried to doze. But sleep was a thing apart from her quivering body and her fevered brain where thoughts flitted at hazard like Wotan's daughters on the eve of great battles. Lady Diana was trying to regain her poise, but vainly.

"What causes this agitation?" she asked herself. "Why this extraordinary fever?" The unknown man she had seen was nothing more than a Venetian in a hurry, or a tourist or any ordinary man, nevertheless— On many occasions in the course of her adventurous life she had come across handsome men, men of the type who rouse fugitive desire in the hearts of women sensitive to their virility. Never had she deigned to accord them the honour of a secret thrill or dedicated for their seduction the offering of a silent appeal. Why, then, on this occasion, was she waiting with such anxiety for the return of her good-hearted emissary and the report which would come back with him?

The dome of the Dogana was beginning to show upon its golden cheeks the first rays of the rising sun, when the distant sound of a motor caused Lady Diana to spring hurriedly from her couch. She leaned from the window. Below, at the turn of San Toma in front of the Balbi Palace, the *Triton* was gliding through the tranquil waters. Jimmy, bareheaded, was at the wheel. Diana waved to him and he, in turn, waved his scarf. It was not long before his hurried step resounded in the corridor, and he entered the room.

"Well?"

"Ah, darling! my hands are frozen. It's cold out there, you know. Give me a drink of brandy."

"Poor little Jimmy! Here, drink this."

Jimmy gulped down the potent liquid, rubbed his hands and exclaimed, half-seriously, half-jokingly:

"Gee! You certainly gave me a chase. The next time you want to know anything, I'll get you a detective."

"Well, dear, what did you find out?"

"Hold on, Diana. Let me begin at the beginning. You told me, didn't you, that the phantom motor boat went toward Saint Mark's? Well, listen to this! I went the entire length of the Canal and I looked at every yacht anchored at the club. Then I went by the *Danieli*. No sign of the *Beatrice*. I got hold of the porter at the hotel. He knew nothing at all. I quizzed the barman. He said to me: 'Oh, yes, I know the boat you mean. I understand it belongs to a Spanish grandee, staying at the Lido.' I jumped into the *Triton* and started for the Lido, but I lost my way and the first thing I knew, I grounded my keel opposite San Servolo. That was fine. There was a madman in the asylum yelling bloody murder. One of the Excelsior Palace boats went by. I signalled to the pilot. He pulled me out—hundred lire tip! I started again and got to the hotel."

Still no *Beatrice*. I asked some people. The night watchman said: 'Oh, yes, the motor boat with the black star. I think it belongs to a wholesale hardware merchant from Trieste.' Just for luck I went into the Excelsior, looked over the terrace, the bar and the ballroom, but I couldn't find any trace of my Spanish grandee who is a merchant from Trieste. I went on my way. The watchman at the hotel, near the bridge, said: 'Oh, I know what you mean. The boat that goes like a torpedo. I understand it belongs to a rich Egyptian who is living in the Civran Palace.'

"There was only one thing left for me to do. I turned back to Venice with the idea of looking over the Civran Palace on the Grand Canal in the hope of finding the real identity of this Spanish-Egyptian merchant from Trieste. It was a little late to call out the occupants of the *palazzo*. Fortunately there was a small informal reception going on: six or seven people were talking in the gallery on the first floor. Some of them saw me pass beneath their windows. They were very gay. One called out in a friendly way: 'Have you lost something in the canal, monsieur? Would you like a candle?' For the fourth time I repeated my question. 'The *Beatrice*? We've never heard of it, but if you'd like a cocktail, come right up.' Then someone leaned out and called: 'Is that you, Butterworth?' I recognized Barbarigo, who asked me laughingly: 'What are you doing out all alone at this hour of the night? If you're looking for Desdemona, she's playing dummy bridge with Iago in the loggia.'

"I asked Barbarigo to come down. He said: 'You're looking for a boat with a black star? It seems to me I've seen it; but I'm very sure that it belongs neither to a Spanish grandee nor to a hardware merchant nor to an Egyptian. I've often seen it tied up at the corner of the rio San Luca

and the rio Fuseri. You're very likely to find it between the Campo Manin and the San Fantino quarter; that is, provided its owner is not off on a bat. At all events, that is where you might find out what you want to know.'

"I thanked Barbarigo. He called me back. 'I'm not particularly curious,' he said, 'but I would like to know just why you explore Venice at two o'clock in the morning to find an unknown motor boat!'

"'It's owner nearly collided with me to-night and I want to find him to teach him manners by means of a good right to the jaw.'

"'Oh, you Americans!'

"I started off again and went by the Dandolo and Loredan Palaces. The rio San Luca wasn't far away; it looked like a dark hallway paved with gondolas. I nearly swamped one and bumped into another and caromed back on to a flat-boat loaded down with baskets of tomatoes and cucumbers. I passed under the two little bridges of the Campo Manin and went by the Carita. You know, that rio is actually sinister at night. It's a wonderful setting for a crime—for instance, in the days of the Mercenaries—you know what I mean, that fellow with the funny name—Oh, yes! Carmagnola. You remember when Carmagnola was trying to keep on good terms with both the Republic and the Duke of Milan?—Well, all of a sudden, I recognized the *Beatrice*. She was tied at the bottom of a steep staircase which led to a two-storey house with two windows, iron-barred and a small door at the top of the steps. A prison in miniature. No light, of course. I jumped into the *Beatrice* and inspected her from bow to stern in the hope of finding the owner's name. I grabbed these little mementoes at random. We may need them to give the scent to a bloodhound. Here they are."

Jimmy stopped long enough to throw on to the

blue bedspread the results of his hunt: a chamois glove, a copy of the *Secolo* and a box of safety matches.

Lady Diana looked at these objects with interest.

"How," she said with a sigh, "do you expect to find out anybody's name with those things?"

"Well, let us imitate the deductive reasoning of detectives—in the first place, the man smokes. He is an Italian and he buys his gloves in London—wait a moment—there are some words scratched on the edge of the *Secolo*—'*mercoledì, 5 ore*'—Wednesday, at five o'clock. That shows that he really is an Italian."

"That doesn't give us his name and address. Does he live in this house which looks so much like a prison?"

"Let me tell you the rest. So far you have heard nothing, Diana. While I was gathering souvenirs from the mysterious motor boat, a sort of port-hole opened under the eaves and a head popped out. I said to myself: 'It must be a housemaid. If I give her a good tip everything will be all right.' So I sang out in my best Italian: '*Scusi signorina!*'"

"A bass voice answered me:

"'What are you doing in that boat?'"

"The darkness had fooled me; it was a man. By way of answer, I countered: 'Is the proprietor there?'"

"'No, why?'"

"'Why, I simply wanted to know what kind of motor he had. Who owns this boat?'"

"'That's none of your business. Get along with you!'"

"'Tante grazie. Merci beaucoup. Thank you, old top.'"

"This brilliant dialogue having terminated, the port-hole closed and the strange gentleman disappeared like the cuckoo in a clock. Diana, can you believe that it was a priest, or at any rate someone

connected with the church, dressed in a black cassock? You'll have to admit that's queer. What in the world could your smart-looking yachtsman be doing at three o'clock in the morning at a priest's? If I had seen a pretty woman I would not have been half so much surprised as to see this sour-faced Bartholo. I've seen the *Barber of Seville* in New York, and this bird looked just like the little girl's guardian—with a long, bony face like an underfed mule's. However, as I didn't want to cause any scandal at such an hour, I climbed back into the *Triton* and turned into the rio Fuseri. There was one gondola with an old *felze* as full of holes as a sieve. I hid under the leather top and watched Bartholo's house through the holes. A long time passed. I heard the clock of San Fantino strike four. Not much romance, you know, waiting all alone in a musty-smelling gondola. I tried to kill time by thinking of all the gay eighteenth-century ladies with their impudent patches and panniered skirts, who must once have sat on my worn old seat, but I couldn't get away from that damned musty smell that made me absolutely sick. The more I looked at that pale shadowy house with its two black-barred windows and mottled front, the more it looked like a sick young girl with her face covered with pimples and blotches.

"Suddenly, the door opened. A man came out, climbed over the boats, reached the quay and went off down an alley. At first I thought it was the fellow I was after, but the *Beatrice* was still there. Finally, tired of watching in vain, I climbed back into the *Triton* and here I am. That's the full report of my activities, Diana."

Jimmy played mechanically with the revealing box of matches and joked:

"But what's the difference, Diana? You certainly can't be in love with that chap?"

"What! in love? Really, Jimmy, some of your ideas are beyond belief."

"Well, I only wanted to know, because it is not exactly the thing to employ one's lover to find a rival."

Lady Diana shrugged her shoulders. Bringing into play that extraordinary facility for deception which is always at the command of a woman of the world she assumed an injured air and replied:

"A rival! How can you imagine such a thing, Jimmy, you who have everything to please a woman: youth, good looks and money?"

Jimmy got up and protested, but without much conviction:

"Don't try to kid me, dearie. I wasn't born yesterday."

"But I'm not 'kidding' you. I'm telling you the truth."

Jimmy succumbed to the flattery and threw out his chest. He squared his shoulders, while his fingers automatically adjusted his tie.

"Go to bed, Jimmy," Diana said. "You must be worn out. We'll talk more about this to-morrow."

Jimmy, ever amenable to his lady's whims, kissed her and left the room. Lady Diana lit the small light on her bed-table. She was more wide awake than ever. The three souvenirs from the *Beatrice* lay on the bed beside her. No religious fanatic ever gazed with more interest at the relics of a saint. Her blue eyes adoringly caressed the empty glove, that perishable covering of a hand of which she could intuitively divine the resistless masculinity. She did not even try to resist this attack of an unknown who, in a single night, had ineradicably imprisoned her interest. She contemplated each of the three objects in turn and tried to solve the enigma of that personality by means of the words written in pencil on the magazine. She strove to

realize that iron will which the decision of the handwriting indicated, to anticipate the reactions of that ego which, from the very tone of his voice, she knew to be imperious.

And now the morning sunshine invaded her room, painting a thousand lovely colours on her antique vases and her iridescent Venetian glass. The distant whistle of a steamer announced the awakening of the city, but Lady Diana was indifferent to the morning's charms. She was no longer alone in her room; her thoughts were interwoven with those of an imaginary guest who answered all those questions as yet unformulated. To make of this spectre a reality, she had only to invoke the aid of a chamois glove, a copy of a magazine, and a match-box.

* * * * *

Every day at half-past six, Countess Moltomini was accustomed to gather her court around her at *Florian's*. There, while the glasses of port increased in number on her table surrounded by iron chairs, the evening shadows fell on Saint Mark's Square and the pigeons, tired of being photographed by a hundred thousand morons who fed them with corn, retired to their homes beneath the marble cornices. They disappeared in flapping groups, like leaves borne on an autumn wind. In the meantime, quantities of tourists pushed each other hither and thither before the shop windows and went into ecstasies over the coloured leathers, the moonstones, the little alabaster lions and the inkstands in the shape of gilded gondolas.

On the evening in question, Countess Moltomini was enthroned with Lady Diana at her right and the Marchioness d'Etrevan on her left. Commander Lorenzetti was sipping an ice and Tra-deletto was toying with a vermouth and soda. They were discussing Michel Georges-Michel's last novel *Dans la Fête de Venise!*

"It is certainly a charming picture of the City of the Doges," Tradeletto said. "That French writer has put his pen—as only a true lover of the lagoons can do—on all the hundred different aspects of our city. When one loves Venice, when it gets into one's blood with all its charm and beauty, one never betrays it—even with a fountain pen."

And the Marchioness d'Etrevan agreed :

"Yes, Michel Georges-Michel has certainly paid his debt to the æsthetic. For every one of us who comes here is a debtor to this Venice of the generous heart which offers us without stint its purifying treasures of beauty and light. Read André Suarès. You remember the splendid hymn he composed in his *Voyage du Condottiere* in honour of the city which knows no rival?"

Countess Moltomini bowed graciously :

"I thank you in behalf of my ancestor who fought for the glory of Venice."

"And now, my dear, it is literally becoming a German colony. Hosts of Teutonic tourists are invading the hotels. At *Pilsen's*, the waiters offered me a chair last evening and said : '*Bitte, schoen, gnaedige Frau.*' One no longer speaks the language of Guido da Verone, but that of Max Reinhardt."

Countess Moltomini exclaimed :

"Come, come, let's not criticize our ancient enemies. The time has come for world-wide reconciliation. Peace and good-will to tourists who behave themselves!"

"I went to the Charity Ball last evening," Tradeletto said. "A funny thing happened. It seems that during the afternoon the habitués of the famous palace had noticed, displayed on a velvet cushion, a very pretty pair of white kid gloves made for an extraordinarily small hand. Beneath these gloves there lay a slip of paper on which was inscribed in English : 'The person to whom these

gloves belong will be very happy to give a kiss, at eleven o'clock this evening, to whoever has purchased a ticket in advance. Ticket holders will present themselves near the orchestra. The cost of the tickets is ten lire. The proceeds will be used for the city charities of Venice.'

"Naturally, any quantity of young chaps were attracted by the mystery and could not produce their ten lire fast enough. In the evening, speculation was rampant as to the owner of the gloves. Did they belong to that charming English girl with the long delicate fingers, or to that little American doll with such tiny hands?

"Imagine the dismay of these brave gamblers when, at exactly eleven o'clock, a fat ruddy-cheeked man with eyes twinkling behind his spectacles appeared before the orchestra and announced with an excellent Neapolitan accent: 'The gloves are mine. I bought them this morning in a shop in the Merceria. Come along! Whose turn first?'

"When the disappointed Romeos drew back laughing, the stranger, waving the gloves in the air, went on: 'Come now! Console yourselves with the thought that you have done an act of charity without recompense. You'll all go straight to Paradise!'"

Lady Diana passed her cigarette case around the table and, in an indifferent manner, asked Countess Moltomini:

"By the way, do you happen to know a motor-boat called the *Beatrice* which speeds up and down the Grand Canal? Last night its pilot was in such a frightful hurry that he nearly succeeded in sinking my gondola."

"The *Beatrice*?—Have you heard of it, Lorenzetti?"

"No, I can't say that I have, my dear."

"And you, Tradeletto?"

"Nor I."

Lady Diana pretended to jest :

"Then apparently no one in Venice knows this phantom craft. Perhaps it's the Flying Dutchman who has replaced his sails with a turbine."

"At all events, the boat does not belong to a member of our set, Lady Wynham. It must be some foreigner who is here for a short time."

"It's a strange sort of foreigner who reads the *Secolo* and apologizes in impeccable Italian."

"You astound me."

"And furthermore, he is a man who frequents a house which looks very much like a prison—not far from San Fantino, I believe."

Commander Lorenzetti made a peremptory gesture :

"Look here, my dear Lady Wynham. If you will give me forty-eight hours, I'll guarantee to find out the gentleman's name."

"I would be awfully obliged to you, my dear Commander."

Lady Diana said good-bye to Countess Molto-mini and walked back to the Rezzonico, along the calle larga 22 Marzo. At seven o'clock in the evening this historic street is always full of travellers in a great hurry to buy picture post cards before the shops close. As she passed a music store, Lady Diana heard a phonograph grinding out the latest success from the *Pavillon* in Vienna. She looked distractedly at the stalagmites of creamy thread in the Grotto of Laca and did not deign to admire a Carpaccio, guaranteed fast as to colour, displayed in an antique shop between a rosewood spinet minus teeth and some doubtful *quattrocento* souvenirs. She finally arrived behind San Samuelle and refused the offer of a gondolier of the *traghetto*, as Beppo had already seen her and was on his way across the canal to take her to the palace.

Without a word, she jumped into the gondola. In the course of her walk she had been considering

what the Moltomini had said. Could it be possible that the owner of the *Beatrice* was absolutely unknown in Venetian society? And that the servants in the palaces, usually so well informed, had no idea as to this Italian's identity? The enigma annoyed her as much as a personal insult. She was actually angry with the man. She was as much irritated with him as though he had deliberately concealed his identity in order to whet her desire to know him. She was also angry with herself and would willingly have tortured her own flesh to rid herself of the obsession and to attain an indifference as superb as his own. But these fits of rebellion were of short duration. It was twenty-four hours now since she had seen the man, and she had thought of nothing but the solution of the mystery. In the morning she had questioned her servants. At noon she had telephoned the secretary of the Yacht Club. At six o'clock she had gone to sit at Countess Moltomini's table in the secret hope of finding at last the solution of the equation which had for its terms a spray of water, the lifting of a smart hat, and a few words of apology uttered in a vibrant voice.

The purple gondola approached the Rezzonico. Lady Diana came out of her reverie as the boat drew near the landing. Suddenly she straightened up with a shock of surprise. At the wharf was the fine white crest of the *Beatrice* rocking gently between two mooring poles bearing the arms of Lady Diana. A mechanic sitting behind the wheel was reading. Lady Diana's heart began to beat violently. Then Jimmy's voice from the first storey made her look up.

"Say, Diana," he cried, "he's here! We've been waiting for you an hour and a half. We've been drinking porto-flips to kill time!"

Jimmy's head disappeared. Lady Diana found herself seized with a great desire to rush up the

marble staircase, but she controlled her impatience and strolled with assumed nonchalance across the inner court. Jimmy was already there to greet her.

"By golly!" he exclaimed with boyish enthusiasm. "He is here! He came at half-past five to apologize to you and believe me, baby, he is a knock-out."

"Did you receive him?"

"Sure. We introduced ourselves. His name is—wait till I think of it—Angelo Ruzzini? Yes, that's it—Count Ruzzini. Whether it's the type of nobility derived from the Pope, or the kind one buys with a certified cheque makes no difference. All I know is he's a gentleman. I've shown him the whole works: the *salons*, the gallery, your bedroom and my own."

"Jimmy!"

"What of it? He's certainly old enough to have seen a few beautiful ladies' boudoirs by this time. He was crazy about your Palma Vecchio and your orchids and General Liang-Tse who didn't even try to bite him in the calf, and Othello, and Mother's picture and the silver cup I won at Mens Putrida. Take it from me, Diana, we are already pals—anyone would think we had been playing on the same ball team for ten years."

"Please tell him that I will see him in a few moments."

Lady Diana disappeared. She made rapid use of her cosmetics before the dressing-table and entered the library.

The visitor arose. Jimmy announced, in a tone of great importance:

"My dear Lady Wynham, allow me to present my friend, Count Angelo Ruzzini."

"Charmed, Count Ruzzini," murmured Lady Diana and held out her hand, which Ruzzini kissed.

"Lady Wynham," he replied in perfect English with only the suspicion of an Italian accent, "I am

exactly twenty-one hours late in offering you my apologies for yesterday's most unfortunate incident. Believe me, I beg you, that I would not have waited ten seconds had not an urgent mission forced me to continue on my way."

"That motor boat of yours is the terror of the gondoliers of the Grand Canal," said Lady Diana with a smile.

"Alas! Lady Wynham, I am not among the fortunate ones who can dream at leisure on Venetian waters. Instead, I am the last survivor of a rare species—a Venetian in a hurry."

"I trust that you have at least a moment to sit down and smoke a cigarette with us?"

Count Ruzzini seated himself not far from Lady Diana. Jimmy stood before the table mixing fresh cocktails, the shaker in violent action. While he was asking Ruzzini whether he preferred a Manhattan or a Corpse Reviver, Lady Diana inspected her guest.

She had been immediately impressed by the agreeable sound of his voice—the voice of a man irresistible to women, for Angelo Ruzzini was one of those males on whom not even the most blasée women can look with indifference. He had the suppleness of the feline, combined with the physique of an athlete. Still young, scarcely forty, he had the dark complexion of a man who has lived many years beneath the torrid suns of Africa, and the black eyes and the commanding look of one who has seldom known fear. One could imagine the muscles beneath his beautifully tailored tan suit; one could divine the will-power behind the fold of his clean-shaven mouth which, when he smiled, revealed the extraordinarily white teeth of a cannibal. He was correct in every respect, but there was nothing extreme about his appearance. The Ruzzini crest was engraved on his ring and a pink pearl glistened against his dark cravat. The

grey hairs at his temples lent an air of gentleness to his mien of a conqueror. His was an unforgettable face, where force of will had left its mark and where irony knew how to show itself in the folds of the eyelids fringed with very black lashes.

"As long as we have made our acquaintance in so unconventional a fashion," said Lady Diana as she lit a Turkish cigarette, fixed in her holder of blond shell, "do you mind if I ask you how you managed to find me in this palace where I have lived for so short a time?"

"There seems no use in concealing the truth from a lady of your evident perspicacity. This morning I chanced to meet Beppo, your gondolier, who told me who you were. That is how I knew that it was none other than Lady Diana Wynham to whom I must express my most sincere regrets for having so nearly collided with her gondola."

"I see. So Beppo has been talking. Did you buy his confidence?"

"No, not at all. Beppo did this little service for me because we used to know each other."

"What a coincidence! He was in your service?"

"Not exactly, but he served under me in the Foreign Legion."

Lady Diana was about to drop the ashes from her cigarette into a tray of lapis-lazuli, but her pretty hand stopped short in the movement. She looked attentively at Ruzzini. Even Jimmy's shaker came to rest and he exclaimed:

"The Foreign Legion! Now that's interesting!"

"Thirteen years ago I served under the French flag—an attack of insanity, Lady Wynham, or better perhaps, a heart attack. The absurd gesture of a man disappointed in love, seeking oblivion among blood and steel."

Jimmy was all ears. To be intimate with a former member of that famous Legion, of that astonishing body of men about whose exploits he

had read at college, was enough to make him forget even cocktails.

"Say, Ruzzini," he entreated, "tell us about it."

Lady Diana protested:

"Now, Jimmy——" and turning toward Ruzzini she added: "Please excuse him. You must pardon this wild Indian from Massachusetts."

This was too much for Jimmy. He exclaimed:

"Don't be so formal, Diana. Ruzzini and I are friends. There's no reason why he shouldn't tell us why he enlisted with the French—but I bet she was a damned good-looker!"

The Venetian paid no attention to Jimmy and continued smilingly to Lady Diana:

"Whatever else you surmise, don't imagine for a minute that I'm a deserter, or an escaped criminal. In my company there was a Roman prelate, a real Russian prince—I know that because I looked him up—and a great nephew of the Sultan's. Aristocracy in the ranks. But, that is all ancient history. For the time being I am living in Venice, my native city, and if at any time, Lady Wynham, it would please you to let me accompany you, it will afford me great pleasure to help you explore unknown corners in the City of the Doges, which may make you forget one day in June when I inadvertently baptized Your Grace in the waters of the Grand Canal."

Ruzzini rose, took leave of Lady Diana and, escorted by Jimmy, boarded the *Beatrice*. Five minutes later the young American re-entered the library and found Lady Diana lost in thought, in an enormous arm-chair of Havana leather.

"Ah, there you are," she pouted, "you certainly are impossible in society, my dear. You actually push indiscretion to the last limits of the planetary system."

"Oh, come, Diana, don't put on airs! I'll bet you ten to one that you would like to know just

whose beautiful eyes made that fellow—who is evidently a gentleman—join the Legion.”

“Why, of course, I would.”

“Well, then.”

“But that was no reason for being so crude about it.”

“You’ll have to admit that my pal, Ruzzini, is some guy.”

“He’s a very handsome man and what is more, a personality.”

“Wait! We’ve got a copy of *Who’s Who* in Venetian society in the bookcase. We’ll soon find out whether this bird is an adventurer who bought his title at an auction sale or the real old stuff. Here we are—‘R’—wait a minute—now I’ve got it. Listen to this:

“‘The Ruzzini family originated in Constantinople and settled in Venice about the year 1125. In 1732 Carlo Ruzzini was elected doge. The last representative of this illustrious family is Count Angelo Ruzzini.’

“Well, what did I tell you? The gentleman in the tan suit who drank my cocktails and sprinkled you with salt water is an honest-to-God descendant of a doge of the 18th century. I hope that’s enough to convince you that he deserves consideration and respect, and I don’t mind telling you that I think he’s one of the finest chaps I ever met. More than that, if it’s all the same to you, I’m going to invite him to dinner some night this week.”

Chapter Four

THE FLAME IS FANNED WITH MYSTERY

THE gondola of the chimeras glided in the warm, calm night over the glassy surface of the lagoon. Beppo's skilful strokes scarcely disturbed the shadowy mirror where the live points of the stars were reflected. A halo encased Venice and its lights like the golden aureole of flowers on a Fra Angelico Madonna. It seemed as though the earth, suddenly stilled, had entered a cycle of repose and eternal silence and that the world would never know again the awful agitation of humanity struggling to live. Fixed lights shone here and there, incandescent flowers which marked the pathways of this liquid park. There was no breeze from the Lido, nor from the mountains. Even the atmosphere was asleep, overcome by the lethargy of the elements.

Lady Diana, in a diaphanous frock of opaline crêpe de chine, lay with her lithe back against the bear skin rug. Ruzzini, seated in Turkish fashion on the floor, smoked without moving, content to watch the features of his companion, illumined by the light on the gondola. He was admiring her white shoulders which formed a fit setting of pale flesh for the lustrous pearls of her necklace.

"Ruzzini," she said, in a voice that seemed almost unhappy, "you are a mysterious man. This is the fourth time we've met since you had the happy thought of coming to see me. You have even been willing to while away a few hours of your

priceless time with me and to initiate me into some of the secret beauties of this city of which one never knows enough. And yet I feel as though I were conversing with a mask. Carnival time is over, my dear. I talk frankly to you while you answer me with charmingly calculated reticence. Am I unworthy of your confidence?"

Smoke from Ruzzini's cigarette drifted slowly away into the night. Lady Diana could see his white teeth as he smiled mysteriously.

"You are right in what you say, Lady Diana. I deserve your reproach, but I never expected it. How can my modest personality attract your attention?"

"Please don't be sarcastic. The night is too peaceful and the world seems too tired this evening for us to enter into the fatiguing gymnastics of logic. We are not surrounded by snobs whom it is our duty to entertain or by dowagers whom we feel it is our duty to annoy. We are not in the artificial atmosphere of the *salons*. Let us be ourselves, as direct and simple as the night which envelopes us. Let us bare our souls under the black shroud of these shadows which are our accomplices. I had thought that a real sympathy already united us. Was I mistaken?"

"Sympathy is not possible between two such persons as ourselves, Lady Diana. There is only love or hate. Even armed neutrality is a forbidden thing. At this very moment we are either sharpening our daggers or we are treasuring up our future kisses."

Ruzzini's explanation of the situation pleased Lady Diana. She laughed and agreed:

"So be it. Let Destiny take its course. But I would like it a little better if my enemy would only show his head from time to time. Then I would know whether to keep my powder dry or prepare my lipstick."

"It's dangerous to expose oneself. Mystery is a veritable coat of mail. I will tell you what happened to one of my ancestors, Alvise Ruzzini—a captain under Bertoldo d'Este—who, in the siege of Argos, was killed by the Ottomans because he took off his helmet."

"But after all, *caro mio*, do you realize that I know nothing whatever about you except that you fought the Moors along with my gondolier? Are you a special envoy of the Pope, a salesman of glassware, a pillar of the gambling halls, or a misunderstood poet? No one knows."

"Ah, yes! my four years with the Legion!"

The Italian nobleman lowered his long lashes over his black eyes and seemed to look into the very heart of his troubled past.

"Youth! Oh, youth! What errors one commits beneath thy guidance! I can tell you about that now, if you like, dear Lady Diana, but you will have to go back with me more than fifteen years. Since then the tempest of the World War has blown away the locks of hair and the faded flowers, while the *billet-doux* have crumbled to dust in the coffers of dead loves."

Ruzzini was silent. Then brusquely, he went on:

"It was a woman who took me to the recruiting office of the Foreign Legion—the Fort of Saint Jean at Marseilles, Sidi-Bel-Abbès in Algeria, Taza in Morocco—there you have the first stations of a heart wounded by the blow of a fan."

"You, Ruzzini? Vulnerable to that extent?"

"I was once, but to-day I carry the armour which experience brings to men who have lived and loved. How could I have resisted the seductions of that woman? She was a Pole who responded to my advances by sitting down at the piano and curbing my passion with her harmonies. I had nicknamed her 'Madame Orpheus.' She lived in a castle lost in the Carpathians on the Galician fron-

tier. It was one of those castles which one sees now only in the illustrated editions of great nineteenth-century romances, a *burg*, almost in ruins, buried in a forest of pines amid the chaos of a valley flanked by great rocks. Never have I lived more passionate hours than those I spent at Bliznika where I had been invited for the great wolf hunts. Imagine a romantic, impetuous young Latin—Manfred in hunting boots, Lara watching his wrist-watch for the hour of Byronic demonism and dreaming with his shadow of ‘everything one could wish—anything but reality!’

“That Polish woman whom I will call Linda—to put a tag on this wild beast now stuffed and exhibited in the museum of my amorous past—played with my passion like a kitten with a spool of thread. When I begged her to give way to my importunings, she led me into the music-room, a veritable cathedral with great Gothic windows, where the grand piano looked like a tiny bench lost in a corner, and there she played to me nocturnes, ballets, and Chopin waltzes. The haunting romanticism of the player made my heart uneasy, like that of a cat sensing the electricity of an approaching storm. I swear that I suffered actual physical pain when that fiendish little Linda turned upon my hot desire the flood of her heavy, morbid melody. And when I cried for mercy, she turned toward me, her beautiful, long fingers resting on the silent keys, offered me her lips and then escaped murmuring: ‘To-morrow, dear, to-morrow, my beloved!’ And the next day she began the same thing all over again. She tortured me pitilessly, but sweetly, distantly, yet provocatively, a charming executioner crowned with a halo of ash-blonde hair.

“One evening, while I was entreating her with tears in my eyes, in tones of sincerity that would have moved even Lilith, she said to me confiden-

tially: 'Be patient for twenty-four more hours, my darling. My guests are leaving to-morrow. You may remain and then you shall have the recompense which only a love like yours merits!'

"Can you imagine my joy? The next day I could scarcely restrain my expression of delight when my hunting friends departed. They left me with knowing smiles and with hand-shakes full of double meaning, but I was far too happy to pay any attention to their warnings. I dined alone with Linda.

"'You're not eating, my gloomy lover?' she said. 'You should store up strength for the happiness which awaits you!'

"The evening seemed interminable to me. As the hours passed Linda became more and more seductive. In front of the blazing wood fire, in the huge, deserted hall, she suddenly threw her arms around me and kissed me violently—a kiss of such devastating passion that it made me stagger like a drunken man. I knew happiness such as one knows but once in a life-time. For two weeks I lived unforgettable hours with my beautiful Linda.

"One morning one of her cousins, the daughter of a Warsaw professor, arrived at the castle. I was pleasant enough to Ludmilla—nothing more. I was too absorbed with the happiness which I was already enjoying to have the slightest desire to flirt with her. But I don't know what devil tempted Ludmilla. Could it have been the perverse pleasure of annoying her cousin, or simply a more or less human desire to break up our love?

"Whatever it was, it didn't take me long to see that Ludmilla was amusing herself by trying to attract me. One evening before dinner she even had the audacity to throw herself into my arms and pretend to faint, as a joke. Unfortunately, Linda surprised her in that position. She annihilated me with one terrible look although I protested that

Ludmilla was only playing a trick. Linda seemed to accept our explanation, but the atmosphere at the dinner was anything but pleasant.

"At about eleven o'clock, when Ludmilla had said good-night, I ventured to remark to Linda: 'I hope, my darling, that you are not seriously annoyed with your cousin for having acted in such a childish way. To tell the truth, I was astounded at such an impetuous demonstration by so well-bred a young girl.'

"Linda looked me over. There was the hint of an ominous light in her eyes. She answered: 'Oh, it's easy enough to understand, but just the same I shall punish you for your thoughtless philandering with that child. Come with me to my bedroom and ask no questions.'

"Her bedroom was a tremendous place with the ancient ceiling supported by two stone pillars. Linda lit the lamp and turned toward me enigmatically. I laughed: 'Well, what sort of punishment is coming to me for a crime which I never committed?'

"Gently, but imperiously, she shoved me against one of the pillars and said: 'I am going to tie you to this granite column.'

"My surprise was mirrored on my face. Linda's mouth came close to mine and she whispered: 'You are not afraid, are you? You are not a man who would deny the caprices of the woman you love? I only want to imprison you there to impassion you before I take you in my arms. Come on, give in, faithless lover that you are!'

"She took some thick rope from a cupboard and with unsuspected strength bound me to the pillar from head to foot. Of course, as you visualize it, the whole proceeding was ridiculous, even grotesque. This almost childish Fenimore Cooper setting, reminiscent of a medieval torture chamber, should have amused me. But it did not

amuse me, for I was a fatuous lover, and, besides, I was haunted by a lurking presentiment. Linda kissed me lightly on the cheek and disappeared.

"I waited five minutes, ten, a quarter of an hour in that solitary room with its stone walls and its heavy furniture of black oak. One detail alone softened the severity of the setting—the huge low bed covered with dark furs, the partly turned back sheets, marvellously embroidered, and the whole illumined by a small blue lamp, frivolous as an eighteenth-century doll.

"Suddenly the door opened. Linda reappeared in a peach-coloured negligée. She smiled at me adorably. Then, on the threshold of the open door I saw the outline of a man stealing in, hesitatingly. Linda urged him on, in Polish. He entered. Stupefaction made my heart stop beating for a moment, only to resume its rhythm in mad disorder. I was incapable of uttering a sound. I looked at the man. A wood-cutter, perhaps? Some tramp? A game-keeper? Linda spoke to him in a low voice and pointed at me. The great brute inspected me, grinning. My muscles nearly snapped in my desperate effort to break the ropes which bound me, but I was too well tied. I had to remain powerless against the pillar and *watch*. . . . Lady Diana, I need to tell you no more."

Ruzzini threw his cigarette into the inky water and watched Lady Diana, who was lying motionless, her head resting on her hands crossed behind her back, her beautiful bare arms framing her short blonde hair. Ruzzini gave a short, harsh laugh—the cry of a mocking-bird in the night.

"I was young, Lady Diana, I suffered the tortures of the damned, for my penance lasted nearly all night. Toward four o'clock in the morning, Linda ordered the man to set me free. He approached me. She must have read murder on my face and, understanding that I would strangle her accom-

plice, she dismissed him curtly. It was she who untied the knots and said in a hoarse voice: 'I told you I would punish you for having deceived me with Ludmilla.' "

"And what did you do?" asked Lady Diana, much moved.

"I did what any desperate lover would do. I expressed my disgust in uncompromising terms and called her by the name her actions merited. I reiterated my innocence and ran to my room where I packed my bag. A quarter of an hour later I left the castle in the dead of night. I walked to the railroad station five miles away and took the first train for Lemberg. A man of better balance would have gone to Berlin or to Vienna to forget this nightmare in the arms of another woman; but I, a wrecked and broken lover, too tired to face life, sought oblivion by enlisting under the green epaulettes of a soldier of the Foreign Legion."

Lady Diana closed her eyes. After a short silence, she asked:

"And should the same thing happen now, what would you do?"

"Now I would say to Linda: 'My dear, your recreations are worthy of Catherine of Russia.' "

"No, my dear, you wouldn't say that if you still loved her."

"That's true. But I *would* say it just the same, because I shall never love again."

The mock gesture of menace made by the Scotch lady brought a smile to the Venetian's face and he added:

"I know what you are going to say; it's never safe to swear you'll not do a thing again. But, my dear friend, when I say I shall never love again, I mean that I shall never give myself up to a devastating passion. Of course, I shall desire many another woman. Some of them I shall even love in a nice, polite, diluted sense of the word.

But the season of thunderbolts, of rendezvous in the pouring rain and letters blotted with salty tears—that period is over for me. I am satisfied now by transitory affairs; I prefer the discreet call of a migratory bird to the chatter of a tame magpie.”

“Then the inexcusable behaviour of one woman has cured you for ever of Woman?”

“No, not cured. I simply mean to say that she has inoculated me against Love.”

“And since your experience in the Foreign Legion? Certainly while you were in Africa, you must have changed your point of view. And after you had finished fighting, you must have met someone who made you forget the sins of the *châtelaine* of the Carpathians?”

“To tell the truth I did meet a woman whom I almost loved desperately. Luckily Fate struck aside the hand that was lifting the hemlock to my lips.”

“Tell me about it.”

“She was a Parisienne, married to an Englishman. I had played golf at Vichy with her husband and he had introduced me to his wife—a superb creature whose smartness and taste belonged in the category of the fine arts. I believe I had never seen a more innate appreciation of colour, a better idea of line, or a more perfect instinct for wearing clothes. I paid ardent court to this woman, who deigned to share my infatuation. She offered to live her life with me. With joy in my soul, I accepted. . . . A detective in her husband’s employ surprised us at Biarritz. The next day my companion disappeared. Some time later I discovered that she had arranged the whole thing to get a divorce from her husband in order to marry a much richer American who offered her a New York roof-garden, his heart and his millions. I have never since seen this eclectic Parisienne whom

I was on the point of really adoring. She completed the cure which the Pole had begun."

These confidences of the nobleman interested Lady Diana intensely. She affected to laugh and, adopting the same light manner which he had employed in narrating these tales of his past life, she said :

"But Ruzzini, you are very handsome—oh, yes, you are—no one can tell me that you haven't heard that a hundred times, and that a thousand and one women have not secretly desired to know you better."

"I know nothing about that. Perhaps I have not loved the ones who might have made me happy throughout my life. It only goes to prove once more that love is a child's merry-go-round where one grabs at the rings at random. Sometimes a heart of gold hangs from that ring; sometimes a sordid soul."

"Where lies true wisdom?"

"In watching the merry-go-round."

"And if your age does not yet place you legitimately in the ranks of the spectators?"

"Then play with the rings without paying attention to what is attached."

A motor launch passed in the distance and its waves made the gondola rock, recalling Lady Diana to the reality of the moment. She asked her companion once again :

"And now?"

"I am living happily because the god of love has put me out of the game. From my position above the net I count hearts out."

"What I meant is: what is your principal interest in life?"

"I haven't any."

"Ruzzini! I don't believe you. In my eyes you are the personification of a man of action. You, an idler! Never in the world! Will-power emanates

from you like waves from a wireless station. One would have to be a complete fool not to sense the strength of your will. Don't try to tell me that you're simply drifting on the shores of the Adriatic and moon-dreaming. Furthermore, you told me the other day that you were a Venetian in a hurry!"

"Lots of people have been in a hurry to no purpose."

Lady Diana shook her head impatiently:

"No, no. Don't take me for a simple-minded idiot who will swallow anything. I have learned to know men and until somebody proves me wrong I shall regard you as a man of action and not a model escaped from *Vanity Fair*."

"Your opinion flatters me, Lady Diana. But I don't entirely deserve it. Who can truthfully claim to have accomplished anything? Isn't the world a cross-roads of lost intentions? Isn't human will-power like a bullet shot from a rifle? Its initial speed diminishes little by little and its course finishes ignominiously in the dust. And that is the way most human ambitions find their ends."

"Nevertheless, you were engaged on some urgent business on the night when you almost overturned my gondola. Was it a rendezvous with a lady?"

"Don't you know me well enough by this time to realize that no such reason would have prevented my turning back to apologize for my carelessness?"

"I understand. You evidently do not choose to enlighten me as to your occupations. You have partly opened for me the book of your sentimental past, but you do not consider me worthy of initiation into the serious activities of your life. Forgive my involuntary indiscretion. I shall not allow it to happen again."

Lady Diana turned to Beppo and ordered curtly:

"Home, please."

The gondolier quickly turned the boat about and

proceeded in the direction of the Rezzonico. Lady Diana seemed utterly to ignore the presence of Ruzzini, who gazed at her silently through half-closed eyes.

"Lady Diana," he said suddenly, "there are times when a man worthy of the name has not the right to reveal the secret of his acts. I am now in a position where the slightest indiscretion would lead to the most disastrous results. I know that you will now understand my reserve, which I would maintain before my own mother."

"Even before a woman who loved you so much that she would die rather than betray you?"

"Unquestionably."

Lady Diana laughed sarcastically:

"Tell me something, Ruzzini. You are not anti-Fascist, are you?"

"On the contrary, I have always supported the party."

"What a pity! It would have been such fun to have spent an evening on the lagoon with a real conspirator. Life to-day is so stupidly flat and devoid of romance."

"What a mistake! Never in history has Europe known a period more troubled, or more likely to lead to adventures. Wireless, railroads, universal suffrage have not killed romance. It abounds in the *rues*, the *rii*, the streets and the *strassen*. It waits for you in the corner of a railroad carriage, of a steamer, or a 40 horse-power motor; on the pavement of a great capital, or in the smoking-room. It is childish necessarily to arm it with mask and domino! It is hidden in the heart, Lady Diana. There are more romantic incidents in the life of a twentieth-century millionaire than you would ever have found in that of a pirate in the day of the Dandolo. In our day, life is commonplace only for the mediocre."

"You have a persuasive tongue, Ruzzini."

"I express well what I feel strongly. Unlike many of my countrymen, for me the word is only the consequence of the act : I act first ; I talk afterwards."

"Except when you are a little wary of a discreet friend—oh! I am only teasing you, *carissimo!*"

"Lady Diana, isn't your own life the most flagrant proof that I am right? Your life which is a tapestry of adventures and dramatic events woven on the web of Fate?"

"What do you know about my life?"

"Not much, but what little I have learned about your past convinces me that the superhuman does not astound you and that you would say with Goethe: 'One must make many mistakes to make life endurable.' One thing that you have had is the audacity to live. You understand me? You have travelled all over 'our humid mother, the earth,' as the Russians call it, and you have learned to live in extremes. Like me, you know the bitterness of disillusionment and the joy of well-spent days. '*Wer nie sein Brod mit Traenen ass*'—'he who has not mixed his bread with tears' is not fit to touch the hem of your dress nor to shake this hand of mine which has killed. But I see that we are nearing the Rezzonico; this means good-bye, Diana, for I leave to-morrow for Milan and Rome."

"Ruzzini, will you be back in Venice for the party that I am giving on Redemption Night? It will give me great pleasure to have you come."

"Oh, yes! Mr. Jimmy Butterworth told me that all the young hopefuls of Venice wanted to crown you *dogaressa*."

"Yes, but that's absurd."

"I protest. Five centuries ago you would have been worthy of sitting in the Ducal Palace and of receiving at the foot of your throne the procession of twelve gold-crowned noblewomen, which com-

memorates the violation of the nuns of San Pietro in Castello by the Istrian pirates."

"Then I can expect you a week from Saturday?"

"I shall surely have returned to Venice by that time, and nothing could prevent me from being present at the triumph of Diana Anadyomene, risen with all her charms from the smooth waters of Loch Lomond."

Ruzzini stopped the gondola at the corner of the rio San Vidal, took leave of Lady Diana and disappeared past the ivy-covered grills of the Franchetti Palace.

A few minutes later, satisfied and preoccupied, Lady Diana entered her *palazzo*. Her evening with Ruzzini had left a bitter-sweet impression, pleasing to her intelligence, but irritating to her emotions. Her mind and her body were in conflict. She was far too analytical and too primed with worldly knowledge not to understand the cause of the uneasiness aroused in her by the words of the patrician. She loved the frank way he looked at things, his immediate understanding of people. But she disliked his lack of faith and his habit of calculating before he spoke or acted. She knew perfectly well that she had allowed herself to be entertained the way a child is amused with fairy tales. He had tossed her morsels of his amorous life as the tamer throws the panther a ball to play with in his cage. He had shown her a fragment of his heart without unveiling his thoughts. That was what shocked her, humiliated her, exasperated her. She who was accustomed to be so proud and haughty, she who for three years had watched with indifference the men who followed in her wake, she, now, was disconcerted to have a man show such reluctance to satisfy her curiosity and so little pleasure in the interest she took in him.

There was one extraordinary detail about it also : Ruzzini had not made the slightest allusion to

Jimmy. Was he so indifferent to the young American's intimacy with Lady Diana that he did not even bother to mention him? Was this the measure of his indifference, or the supreme cleverness of a diplomat skilled in a sentimental career?

It was a quarter of twelve when she reached the gallery on the first floor. She heard bursts of laughter in her boudoir and opened the door to find Jimmy playing poker with Henri de Mantignac, Sir Reginald Duckling and Erich Krause. Jimmy had just held four queens and was busy gathering in several hundred lire. The gamblers arose, shrouded in blue smoke.

"What awful smoke!" exclaimed Lady Diana. "Aren't you ashamed of invading my sanctuary in this manner?"

"It's Jimmy's fault," Duckling replied. "We wanted to play in the library, but he insisted on our coming here."

Jimmy seized Lady Diana in his arms with all the impetuousness of a young goat and cried:

"Forgive me, darling. I only wanted to give your three admirers a thrill by letting them spend an evening in the aroma of your perfume."

Lady Diana shook hands with everyone and glanced carelessly at the table. There was a heap of notes by Jimmy's place.

"Diana," he said, "there is no doubt about it. You've surely deceived me this evening—lucky at cards, unlucky at love, you know."

She shrugged her shoulders disgustedly:

"What vulgarity, my poor friend!"

"That may be, but I call these gentlemen to witness that I've been holding nothing but straights and four of a kind while you, Madame, have been drifting in a gondola with the best-looking buck in Venice. You must admit that one must be gifted with unusual tolerance to overlook such behaviour."

Lady Diana walked over to Jimmy and, beside herself with rage, threatened :

"One more word of this sort and I leave to-morrow."

Jimmy made a clownish pretence of tears and pleaded :

"No, Diana, don't go away. Me weep—terribly. You cruel lady to your little Jimmy."

But she was in no humour for jokes.

"This great fool exceeds all limits truly," she cried.

"Well, am I not right?" persisted the obstinate young Yankee. "I told Diana she could stay out until midnight and she goes star-gazing with Ruzzini. I call on you, my friends, to back me up. If we don't put a foot down now, Diana will drop us all like a lot of hot cakes to sing *Funiculi-Funicula* with that count who's caught her fancy and for——"

Jimmy never finished his speech. Lady Diana's fist interrupted it, applauded by the laughter of Mantignac, Duckling and Krause.

"Dear friend," put in Mantignac conciliatingly, "come, don't be angry! Jimmy is a humorist and loves to annoy you."

"Permission to stay out until midnight! Do you suppose for one single second that I await the permission of that clown to act as I choose and go where I like? This young celluloid dealer unspeakably abuses the indulgence I give him!"

At the mention of Ruzzini's name, Erich Krause had raised his close-cropped head. He seemed more interested in the name of the Venetian than in the quarrel between Diana and Jimmy. Suddenly he spoke :

"You know Count Ruzzini, dear lady?"

Lady Diana immediately forgot the defects of the juvenile Cræsus and turned to Krause :

"Yes, I know him. Do you?"

"Slightly. I met him one day in Berlin."

"In Berlin! Tell me about it."

"Ha, ha! Now you can see for yourselves that she is too much interested in this Don Juan," laughed Jimmy.

Duckling silenced him, saying:

"You haven't the floor, Jimmy. Let Krause talk."

"Well, I'll tell you exactly under what circumstances the name of this Italian came to my ears. In 1919, I belonged to the technical and economic committee attached to the *Waffko*, the German Commission of the Armistice. One day, a Turk named Selim Bey came to see me. I had had certain dealings with him during the war. He now wanted me to use my influence to buy certain merchandise, about which I shall go into no further detail. The transaction was to be made in dollars and in the name of Count Ruzzini. I asked the Turk for whom Count Ruzzini was acting and what was the actual destination of this merchandise. His answer was that Ruzzini, a Venetian gentleman, had been one of the heads of the Intelligence Office in Rome and that he was now operating for a South American republic. A Brazilian boat would take on the cargo at Hamburg. I relayed the proposition to the proper authority because, naturally, we preferred to sell these materials rather than to turn them over to the Entente. I supposed that the transaction would take place quickly and was much surprised when the Information Bureau of the Wilhelmstrasse informed me that the Selim Bey-Ruzzini deal was no longer possible. An English detective had got on the trail and warned the War Office. Not long after, I met Count Ruzzini with Selim Bey and a former *aide de camp* of the Emir Feisal, in the lobby of the Esplanade Hotel. We talked for a few minutes and my Turkish friend announced, without mani-

festing the slightest resentment: 'The English broke up our little deal, *Herr Doktor*. I am very sorry we put you to so much trouble.'

"When I remarked that it was of no consequence, Count Ruzzini put in: 'It doesn't matter, sir! The English have won the first set, but they'll lose the next!' And that was all."

Lady Diana had listened to Krause with breathless interest. Now she asked:

"And what do you make of all that, Erich?"

"Oh, nothing at all. Or, if you want me to be perfectly frank with you, I may as well say that there are only two conclusions to be drawn—first, Count Ruzzini never had the slightest idea of sending that merchandise to a South American republic."

"Why not?"

"Because, if he had, the British Government certainly would never have intervened."

"And the other conclusion?"

"That Count Ruzzini is no great friend of the English. Had you heard his tone when he assured me that they would lose the second set, you would agree with me."

The poker players looked at Lady Diana. Jimmy was the first to speak:

"Do you see, Diana, there you go compromising yourself with an Anglophobe who carries on underhand affairs? Bad that! Poum! Poum! Naughty little English girl! Very bad!"

"Ah, Jimmy, how you bore me!"

Sir Reginald Duckling took his turn at irony:

"Now I understand why our Italian nobleman almost sank the gondola the other evening. He caught the scent of two British subjects, Diana and me!"

But Lady Diana had arisen brusquely:

"You are all exasperating with your stupid jokes—good-night!"

She wrapped her evening cloak about her bare shoulders as a bird folds its wings and slammed the door of her boudoir behind her.

Chapter Five

JIMMY ATTEMPTS TO QUENCH THE FLAME

JIMMY and Sir Reginald Duckling were in the habit of basking in the sun each morning at the Lido. Lying almost naked on the Excelsior beach, they exhibited nine-tenths of their anatomy with that calm immodesty of the Anglo-Saxon race. At noon, they came back on board the *Triton* to the Grand Canal, where Jimmy left Sir Reginald at the *Danieli* and went on to the Rezzonico.

The day after Lady Diana had left the poker players disconcerted before their disordered cards, Sir Reginald said to Jimmy:

"Take me to the railroad station, will you? I want to reserve a berth on the Simplon Express for a charming little Viennese I know who is leaving to-morrow."

The launch glided along the "S" of the Grand Canal—that serpent tattooed on the flesh of Venice—and stopped before the iron bridge. Jimmy and Sir Reginald jumped out. Suddenly Jimmy seized his friend by the arm and whispered:

"Look over there on the station steps. That's Ruzzini going away and he has a woman with him!"

Sir Reginald whistled and said sardonically:

"Diana's beau is not going to be bored on his trip."

"Go and reserve your berth. I'm going to spy on that scion of the nobility."

Jimmy, at a safe distance, followed Ruzzini and observed him attentively. The woman with him was dressed very quietly. Twenty years old, perhaps, thin and dark, she had the pure profile of a

cameo. She resembled the Madonna of Castelfranco; all she needed was the Christ-child on her knees and the saint standing at her right, to be taken for that tender, gentle creature from Giorgione's palette. She walked along beside Ruzzini with light, perfect grace, holding him familiarly by the arm. The Milan train was about to leave. Ruzzini kissed his companion, jumped into his compartment and leaned out of the window to say a last farewell. The train started. The young woman waved her handkerchief and remained pensive on the platform.

But Jimmy had seen enough. He rejoined Sir Reginald and went back to the Rezzonico. He could not wait to impart his discovery to Lady Diana.

"Diana! It's I!" he exclaimed, pounding on her bedroom door. "It's a quarter of one. Are you up?"

A chilly voice answered: "Do leave me alone!"

"But listen, Diana. I must talk with you. Open the door!"

The same tired voice repeated: "Will you please leave me in peace!"

Jimmy, out of patience, called through the door:

"Come on, Diana, open the door, damn it! I've just been to the station and I've seen Ruzzini."

At these words, hurried footsteps, softened by the pliable soles of satin mules, approached the door. Diana opened it. Scantly clad, she stood with a tiny brush in her right hand, a small jar of cosmetic in her left.

"What are you talking about? You say you saw Ruzzini at the railroad station?"

"Wait a minute, sweetie. Kiss me first, or I won't tell you a thing."

She slapped a kiss on Jimmy's face as a hurried postmaster cancels a stamped letter and demanded in obvious impatience:

"Well?"

"Well, I repeat that I saw that good-looking devil Ruzzini at the station at noon."

"My dear child, you are telling me nothing extraordinary. He told me only last evening that he was leaving to-day for Milan."

"Did he also tell you that he would be accompanied by a pretty brunette?"

"What?"

"A very pretty brunette. She had a profile, baby, that you could eat on toast with maple-syrup."

Lady Diana had seated herself before her dressing-table. She was carefully blackening the long lashes which shadowed the Wedgwood blue of her eyes. She manifested no surprise, no particular interest.

"Even so, I don't see the point. Are we going to start ringing all the bells of Saint Mark's, of the Frari and of Zanipolo just because a Venetian gentleman is accompanied to the railroad station by a dark-haired woman?"

Jimmy was a trifle disconcerted, like any raconteur whose story has fallen flat. He hesitated. But suddenly Lady Diana turned around, her little brush in action, and asked:

"Was she really as pretty as all that?"

Jimmy regained his confidence in a flash.

"Was she pretty! By Jove, she has it all over you Scotch Presbyterians. But what got me was the way she hit it off with Ruzzini. Arm in arm on the platform. Paul and Virginia brought up to date. When the whistle blew, the stunning Angelo kissed the beautiful *signorina* like mad and the train must have been a mile away before she stopped waving her handkerchief!"

For once, Jimmy triumphed. Lady Diana pretended to continue her pursuit of beauty, but her hand trembled visibly, and the tiny brush blurred

the lid instead of caressing her long curved lashes.

As she did not speak, Jimmy generously attempted to console her.

"Listen, darling, you don't suppose that a bird like that has been waiting for *your* arrival to play Adam and Eve on the Grand Canal, do you? What I derive from my discovery of this morning is that this particular descendant of the doges prefers brunettes. *Chacun son goût*. That's fair enough, isn't it?"

"I don't suppose anything, Jimmy. I'm simply amused to learn that a man who scorns love in such extravagant terms and who pretends to be immune to all its seductions should embrace his Dulcinea in public. It's funny, that's all," Lady Diana sighed, and murmured: "Ah, men!"

"Now, don't be too rough on the men, dear old thing. What would you do without them? Sit at home and knit!"

"No, we would do great things—really big things."

"Fine. A woman dreaming of big things reminds me of a small child playing with a gun—the inevitable result is an accident."

"My dear friend, I thank you so much for your opinions. At your age, one has no right to judge women. One simply looks at them without seeking to understand them. But run along now. I am dressing. I shall lunch alone. You can amuse yourself with Erich Krause who is waiting for me in the drawing-room."

Jimmy scowled:

"My God, do I have to eat with Krause? That German gets my goat. His national pride gives me a pain."

"*Deutschland über alles*—America first! They go very well together. Between you, you will have condemned the whole world between the hors d'œuvres and the coffee!"

At three o'clock in the afternoon, Jimmy, Krause, Duckling and Mantignac were drinking *strega* on the terrace of the *palazzo*. Jimmy discovered from Emma that Milady had gone off in the *Triton* and would not be back until dinner time. He turned to his guests:

"Look here, this can't go on. We are all four interested in Diana's happiness and we have no right to let her launch herself in a possible affair with a person of doubtful character. Of course, I am her special friend, but you her accredited admirers—I think we ought to work together. When it's a mere matter of helping her amuse herself, I am the first person to aid her, but unlike Tennyson's brook, this sort of thing cannot run on for ever. If we allow her to fool around much longer with this mysterious individual she is going to lose a few pinfeathers, if not something more valuable."

"Krause, you know the chap. What do you think about him?" Duckling asked.

"I would rather not pass judgment on a man I scarcely know. However, offhand, he struck me as a type capable of anything."

"A Ruzzini? A Ruzzini whose forbears ruled in Venice?" protested Mantignac.

"It's easy enough to be well-born and a thorough adventurer at the same time."

"What did he do during the war?"

"He was one of the heads of the Italian Intelligence Office. He acted under the orders of the official chief. As a matter of fact, he was really the power behind the throne."

"Nevertheless, he was tripped up by an English detective in Berlin. That seems all the more strange because in 1919 the Allies were still friends."

"And if that order for munitions—that is what the merchandise amounted to—had been destined

for enemies of Great Britain? Wouldn't that explain something?"

"Ireland?"

"I do not know. England has other adversaries than Dublin."

"But what I can't understand is why Ruzzini, having worked with the Allies all through the war, should suddenly begin traffic with England's enemies."

"Ah, my dear Duckling, that is Ruzzini's secret—money or sentiment, that's the question. A man only acts that way when he wants to make millions, or when he wishes to satisfy a personal vengeance."

Jimmy had listened to the argument between the German and the Englishman and now exclaimed impatiently:

"All that sort of talk won't help me in showing Diana that she's plunging into a dangerous adventure with this chap. I know her too well. You can't convince her with suppositions. What she wants is facts. How are we going to get them?"

Sir Reginald answered:

"Do you want me to make a little visit to the Chief of Police? I have been in touch with him lately about an official matter. There is no doubt but that I can get from him all the facts pertaining to this person."

Lady Diana's four protectors arose. It had been decided that Sir Reginald should go to the Municipal Building and rejoin his friends later at the *Quadri*.

* * * * *

At five o'clock, Jimmy, Henri de Mantignac and Krause, seated in a little rococo *salon* at the *Quadri*, hailed Sir Reginald as he looked for them under the arcades. A group of tourists drank coffee as they turned over the pages of a guide book. The orchestra played woodenly a stale melody of Donizetti's.

Campo Manin bridge and pointed it out to Sir Reginald.

"There it is. Believe me, I know it when I see it. I stood guard for two hours on the corner of this street at the left and didn't even see Ruzzini!"

"Where is the entrance? From the water or the land?"

"I don't know. Let's look around."

They ventured into a dark alley. Jimmy deciphered the name and read aloud: "'calle degli Assassini!' Say, old chap, this looks interesting!"

Sir Reginald stopped. "Ah," he said, "so this is the street of the Assassins which they talk so much about in old Venetian chronicles. It seems that the city council, to put a stop to the crimes which were committed in this quarter, passed a law in 1128 forbidding anyone to wear a beard because the fashion permitted the malefactors to commit their murders without being recognized."

"We're both clean-shaven. The ghosts of the senators will have no reason to find fault with us," Jimmy said. "But here, the house we are looking for ought to be on the left, down this little alley."

They stopped in front of a green door where they saw engraved on a brass plate:

SIGNORA SACCARDI. FURNISHED ROOMS.

They rang. A little old woman in grey, wearing a white apron, opened the door. The corridor was hung with cheap cotton-cloth and lighted by a bulb which formed the corolla in a great yellow paper flower.

"Buona sera," said Jimmy in his best Italian, "Signora Saccardi is at home?"

The little old woman led them into a parlour of a banality without nationality save for a lithograph of King Humbert behind its cracked glass, and a few old numbers of the *Gazzettino Illustrato* on a

table of polished walnut. Jimmy and Reginald waited, much intrigued.

In a few minutes the door opened and *Signora Saccardi* appeared—a woman of forty-five, with black hair drawn back from her olive-skinned face, only slightly made-up. She wore a dark dress, cut rather low in front where a gold cross hung at the angle of pale skin. She welcomed the two foreigners pleasantly, and, since they expressed themselves badly in Italian, she addressed them with astounding ease in English.

"So you are passing through Venice, gentlemen? I can see that. And after the marvels of Saint Mark's you would like to inform yourselves on some of the other beauties of the country, eh?"

Jimmy affected timidity and confessed:

"Well, after all, *Signora*, one gets fed up with Tintoretto and the tombs of the doges and we've been told that you have other pleasant distractions to offer to bored tourists."

"Who told you that?"

"The porter at the Hotel Helvetia."

This recommendation was enough for *Signora Saccardi*.

"Yes, indeed, gentlemen, yes, indeed, follow me please," she said.

She led her guests into a room on the first floor—a sort of combination boudoir and bedroom, with a sofa covered with cashmere in an alcove hung with purple silk.

"Andrea, my sister-in-law, will join you shortly. Will you have *asti spumanti* or dry champagne?"

"Champagne, and the best you have."

She disappeared. Jimmy leaned toward Sir Reginald and whispered:

"Listen, you work on Saccardi while I see what I can get out of the sister-in-law. If Ruzzini has anything to do with this house she'll talk her head off after we've had two or three bottles of dry."

Andrea arrived with some glasses and a bottle on a tray. She smiled at the two men, uncorked the champagne, started the phonograph, clapped her hands and sat down between them, satisfied at having created such gaiety in the gloomy room. *Signora Saccardi's* sister-in-law was a native of Bologna, with light complexion and auburn hair as curly as the wool of a merino sheep. Two rings of gold hung from her little ears and made her look like a comic-opera slave just imported from the markets of Asia Minor. Her brown eyes smiled between her prominent forehead and her round pink cheeks—eyes as candid as those of a well-fed nun, not at all the eyes of a *belle de nuit* dedicated to the entertainment of home-sick tourists.

After a few conventional remarks, the conversation, aided by the first bottle of wine, became more intimate. Sir Reginald remarked :

"*Signora Saccardi* told us that you were her sister-in-law. That's a pleasant little joke, isn't it, Mademoiselle Andrea?"

The young slave pouted reproachfully as though the fact of doubting her relationship to Saccardi was an affront.

"Oh, no," she protested, "Helena and I married two brothers. My husband died on the Isonzo; hers went to the United States and we've never heard from him since. We were left almost without a cent. Of course, I had my pension as a war widow, but that's hardly enough to pay the hairdresser and buy a lottery ticket. She has only her tiny *dot*—a bit of land on the Brenta. She rented this house and she sublets two or three rooms sometimes, and I, well, I decorate them for those occupants who are afraid to be alone at night."

"You practice the Taylor system?"

"What?" asked Andrea.

"The science of division and organization of work. Helena gets them and Andrea keeps them."

Jimmy ordered another bottle of champagne. The ice was broken. The widow of the warrior of the Isonzo had her arms around Jimmy's neck and had abandoned herself to the joys of drinking. The half-widow of the emigrant, sitting beside Sir Reginald, preserved more dignity. Nevertheless, she could not help enjoying the flow of her champagne at a hundred lire a bottle, not including tips. While she went over her collection of phonograph records with Sir Reginald, Jimmy asked Andrea in an offhand way :

"Are all your rooms rented?"

"No, dearie, only two. You can have the other one if you want it."

"But who are the people in the other rooms?"

Andrea was sparing of details.

"Oh, they're some fellows I hardly know. They take their rooms by the week. I don't pay any attention to them. They pay well, so my sister-in-law keeps them."

It occurred to Jimmy that it would be more profitable to interrogate Andrea when the Saccardi was not present. Consequently he explained to Andrea that he wanted to drink with her alone. She exchanged a few words in the Venetian *patois* with her sister-in-law who handed her a key. The girl from Bologna led Jimmy through a hallway smelling of incense, naphthaline and onions, opened a door and turned on a light.

The room was no more luxurious than the others, but it contained a low bed and a crucifix ornamented with two crossed branches of holy boxwood. The frame of a mosquito netting hung in a corner over a wooden Virgin, painted pink and pale blue, who seemed to supplicate Providence with her broken arm.

Jimmy checked Andrea's ardour.

"Are the people who have the other rooms foreigners or Italians?" he asked.

"I've already told you that I know nothing about it."

"Go on, Andrea, that's absurd. Do you expect me to believe that you don't know who they are or where they come from?"

The *Bolognesa* sat down on Jimmy's knees. Slightly drunk, she hummed a little tune, keeping time with her empty glass.

"How curious you are. What do you care whether our boarders are Chinese or underwear salesmen?"

"Why don't you want to tell me?" /

Andrea licked the bottom of her glass with the tip of her tongue and said:

"If you must know all about it, Helena has forbidden me to say anything to anybody. Is that enough?"

"But you can certainly tell me their nationality."

"My God, what a donkey! But because you're nice and I like your face, I will say this much: one is a Spaniard and the other is an Oriental."

"An Oriental? That's rather vague."

"Well, what more do you want? He talks Italian as well as I do. He may be a Turk, a Levantine, a Syrian, an Egyptian. One thing sure is that he is not a Catholic. My sister-in-law put this wooden Virgin and this crucifix in his room and he said to take them away, he couldn't be bothered with them. He's surely an infidel."

Jimmy suddenly realized the way to gain ground. He began to make fun of Andrea:

"Stop trying to kid me, Andrea. Do you think I was born yesterday? I don't fall for this stuff about Spaniards and Orientals. It's just a tale to thrill the tourists."

"Do you mean that I am lying to you?"

"No, your imagination gets the best of you, that's all."

"*Madonna!* Holy Virgin!"

Andrea was outraged by the scepticism of her interlocutor. She got up and argued the matter with all the stubbornness of a drunken woman. Suddenly she shook her dark curls and demanded:

"If I show them to you without their knowing it, will you be convinced?"

"Of course, but I'm not worried. Ha, ha!"

"Wait, you'll promise not to make any noise? Helena would be furious if she knew I was doing this."

"I promise you I'll be as quiet as a mouse."

"All right. Come along with me."

Andrea led Jimmy into the dark hallway. They went down two steps and turned to the left. In the darkness a glimmer of light shone from a transom. Andrea whispered to Jimmy:

"Do you see that? Well, there they are. They have a visitor with them. They have been talking steadily since nine o'clock. If you want the proof that I'm not lying, climb up on that trunk beside the wall and look through the glass over the door."

Jimmy softly mounted the trunk and carefully raised his head to the level of the pane. He saw three people seated around the table talking beneath the conical light cast by a lowered bulb. Papers were strewn on the table, and a map. Jimmy observed each person attentively. One of them was the Oriental mentioned by Andrea; his origin was unquestionable. But the discovery of the other two, a man and a woman, seated side by side, was a great surprise to Jimmy. In the man he recognized the mule-headed Bartholo who had told him to get out of Ruzzini's motor boat on the night when he had played detective; in the other, he recognized the pretty brunette, the Virgin of Castelfranco, who had bade so tender a farewell to Ruzzini when he left for Milan.

Chapter Six

THE FÊTE BEGINS

THE Night of the Redemption. Eleven o'clock. All Venice is out on the lagoon. Crowds of people, clustered together in gaily-lighted gondolas, drifting along, crowding the waterways, choking the canals, besieging the piers. Everyone heads towards the Giudecca where the austere dome of the Redentore Church—magnetic pole of the fête—will soon be illuminated with fireworks. The gondolas pour out of the Grand Canal under a boat bridge especially constructed for this annual holiday. Entire families, seated around narrow tables, are singing popular songs in these floating dining-rooms. Lanterns throw multicoloured lights on the prows decorated with foliage. People scream, call to one another. Everyone is gay. The chirping of the mandolins replies to the wailing of the accordions. The squawks of an ocarina scan the chords of a guitar. Until daybreak Venetians will drift on their lagoon, flasks of Chianti in their hands. At the first gleam of dawn, the endless procession of barques will head toward the Lido and the indefatigable merry-makers will watch the sun rise from the Adriatic, with dark shadows beneath their tired eyes.

On this evening, the Rezzonico Palace was in readiness for Lady Diana's costume fête. While ordinary people amused themselves on the lagoon, the smart set would be dancing in the *salon* of the palace.

Jimmy had been busy for a week, putting the

finishing touches to the arrangements for the coronation of the *dogaressa*. Hanging lanterns outlined the architecture of this historic abode—the work of Massari—and the torches which burned on top of the five mooring poles, mirrored like fiery serpents on the surface of the Grand Canal, threw puffs of light under the Roman arches of the windows. Never had such a scene taken place in the palace since the fifth of July, 1758, when Giambattista Rezzonico, patrician, had been elected doge under the name of Clement XIII.

At ten o'clock in the evening, having conferred for the last time with the *maître d'hôtel*, Jimmy had retired to his room to don his costume. He had chosen that of Rudolph in *La Vie de Bohême*. While he was struggling into the grey trousers which he wore more like a polo player than an habitué of the Latin Quarter, he thought over all the happy sequences to his inspiration. For, the day after his visit to the *maison* Saccardi, he had edified Lady Diana in the following terms :

“ You understand, darling, that this is too much. You must stop compromising yourself with this adventurer. He is in league with an unfrocked monk, a Smyrna rug merchant and a woman too beautiful to be good who attends their conferences in a house of ill fame. I'm not inventing anything. I saw them with my own eyes, thanks to the girl from Bologna. They looked to me as if they were plotting some sort of infamy at *Signora* Saccardi's and, of course, she is their accomplice. I don't think it's necessary for me to tell you any more to convince you that you should forget Ruzzini once and for all. We thought he was a gentleman, and we were wrong. That's all there is to it.”

And Lady Diana acquiesced :

“ I have confidence in you, Jimmy. If what you say is true, the best thing for me to do is to forget about it. Let's say no more.”

From that day, Jimmy had not mentioned the name of Count Ruzzini. Lady Diana had, likewise, appeared to have wiped all memory of him from her mind.

There was a knock at the door. It was Emma, come to escort Jimmy to the dressing-room where Lady Diana was preparing for the great occasion. He tied his student's tie beneath a chin which might well have belonged to a middle-weight boxer and followed Emma.

Lady Diana's dressing-room looked like a dress-maker's establishment. There were any quantity of dresses, heaps of lingerie and various head-dresses, inextricably mixed together in a low-ceilinged room with walls of faded green stucco, decorated with arabesques and rococo ornaments in yellow. In the candelabra, in place of old-fashioned candles, Lady Diana had installed hundred-watt electric lights.

"Jimmy," she asked, hidden in her three-sided mirror like a huntress in ambush behind a wall of glass, "how many people do you think will come to-night?"

"You sent out three hundred invitations. There will be six hundred people."

"Oh!"

"Look here, Diana, a feast such as you are giving in the Rezzonico Palace—don't forget that it isn't every day that one crowns a *dogarossa* in Venice."

"I know, Jimmy dear, but that's only a joke."

"What's the difference? My friend Count Zorzi, editor-in-chief of the *Gazetta di Venezia*, told me only yesterday that all the important newspapers of Milan, Turin and Rome were preparing to publish special accounts of the party. You don't realize it, but you are going to give a thrill to the Italian aristocracy, my dear. And do you know what intrigues all Venice?"

"No."

"They want to know whom you are going to choose for doge."

Lady Diana laughed silently and mysteriously while Emma hooked dress number four.

Jimmy peeked over the mirror.

"Say, dear, you could tell me now whom you are going to choose."

"No."

"Well, then, it's sure to be one of those three Anabaptists—Mantignac, Duckling, or Krause, isn't it?"

"I don't know, and one reason is that it occurred to me that the Venetians might be annoyed should I choose a foreigner."

"Of course—I never thought of that. But if you prefer an Italian, you have a wide choice: Barbarigo, Erizzo, Foscarini, Lorenzetti, Tradeletto, to say nothing of a lot of others such as Zenobio, Farretti, Pesaro and the Prince d'Aspari. Why, after all, don't you share with one of them for the night a part of your cardboard crown?"

"Don't worry, Jimmy. When the time comes I'll make my decision. How do you like this dress?"

"Marvellous! God, but you are beautiful. Won't you let the doge *in partibus* kiss you to the health of St. Mark, the patron of your fête?"

"No, no, Jimmy, you'll ruin my hair—run along now. Ah, while I think of it, I want to remind you that you should play a self-effacing rôle this evening. Don't forget, my friend, that you are not Lord Wynham. Don't put your foot into it any more than you have to."

"You can rely on me, darling."

"You stay in the background, as you ought."

"Oh, yes. I turn on the lights, but I stay in the dark. I understand. Diana, you should be painted in that costume. Veronese will turn over in his grave to-night! Bye-bye, baby."

And Jimmy-Rudolph, Bohemian from Massachu-

setts, did a right-about face whistling an old tune of John Philip Souza's.

Scarcely had the door closed, when Lady Diana dropped the insouciant air adopted for his benefit and briskly asked Emma :

"Has Beppo returned?"

"Not yet, Milady."

Diana made a gesture of impatience and bit her lip. At that moment there was a knock on the other door which communicated with the boudoir. Emma opened it and announced :

"Milady, it is Beppo."

"Tell him to come in."

The gondolier appeared. Lady Diana asked him :

"What did you find out?"

"Madame, I went to the private home of the Count."

"Is that far from here?"

"Not very far. He lives beside the Valmarana Palace on the rio of the Apostles."

"And did you manage to find out discreetly whether he had returned?"

"Yes, Madame, I found out that he had not yet returned, but is expected on the ten-forty train."

"Is that all?"

"Yes, Madame."

"Good. You will stay on duty with the mechanic of the *Triton* in case I need you to-night."

The gondolier went out. Lady Diana's impatience increased visibly. Emma, who had no sympathy at all for Jimmy, remarked :

"Don't be upset, Milady. If the Count is to return by a quarter of eleven, it is evident that it is to be present at your party."

"Do you really think so?"

"Since he promised Milady that he would come."

"He wrote me a note from Rome saying that he would do his best to be here to-night, but there is

nothing less sure. . . . Emma, this coiffure is too tight at the back of my neck and the pearls are badly placed. What I should have done was to tell Beppo to stay outside the house and wait until he saw Ruzzini come in. Then I would have been sure."

"Does Milady want me to call Beppo back?"

"No, what's the use? What time is it now? Twenty minutes past ten? No one will come before eleven o'clock. I have just time to finish dressing."

Emma bustled about. Lady Diana suddenly turned, at the risk of pricking her maid's fingers, saying:

"And suppose his mistress prevents him from coming?"

"Milady, she has not prevented him up to now. He has dined here; he has gone out with Milady three times. In my opinion, that woman is a negligible quantity."

"I am always afraid of a pretty woman who allows her lover to play around with somebody else, and she is pretty, you know. Jimmy compared her to I've forgotten what painting by Giorgione at Castelfranco. It all seems very strange to me. Ah, if I only had had my hands free and could have made a real investigation into his private life, I would never be floundering about in the fog of this enigma. But anyway, I could never permit of the possibility of his discovering my activities and having the fatuity to remark: 'Lady Wynham is so interested in me that she pays detectives in order to know me better!' Never that!"

"Even if he has a mistress, she can't amount to much, judging by the houses she frequents. At all events, Milady has the upper hand. People of that class are easily dislodged."

"From what Beppo told me the other day, she lives in the same apartment with him. Oh, Emma, I can't bear to think of it!"

"Have courage, Milady. I have an idea that everything will be all right."

Lady Diana sighed and leaned over to pick up a great powder-puff from the dressing-table. The gondolas were circulating in greater numbers than ever on the Grand Canal opposite the Rezzonico, lit up from roof to water. On this night, Venice was resuming its former splendour, that splendour of the days when the *Bucintoro* sailed the seas with her sails flying and standards flowing in the breeze. On this lovely July night, little fleets of masqueraders revived the spirit of the past. In the illuminations of the palace, robes of satin and of velvet glistened; the pearls of the turbans, the embroideries of the caps and jewels of the medieval head-dresses scintillated—a veritable kaleidoscope of brilliant reflections.

One by one the gondoliers reached the bridge and in the play of light and shadow cast by the torches flickering in the warm breeze, one could see disappearing into the vestibule of the palace the varied cohort of duchesses and dominoes, brigands and clowns, dancers, sultans and water-nymphs.

The great stairway of the palace, beneath the crystal lights, was a glittering procession of masqueraders who stopped to greet Lady Diana, an eighteenth-century *dogaressa* in pink and gold, a splendidly reincarnated picture of Casanova's century. She seemed to belong by right to that famous line of patricians who once inhabited that unique city, patricians either by birth or by the gift of nature.

Countess Moltomini arrived, followed by her little *entourage*—a Cleopatra dressed by a famous house in Milan, and escorted by high priests tattooed with ochre, who looked as though they had escaped from the bas-reliefs of the temple of Medinet-Abou. Lorenzetti and Tradeletto were greeted with cheers as cannibals from the New

Hebrides, the savage chief belted with rows of teeth and his torso draped with a cascade of small bones. Campione was acclaimed as Cardinal Richelieu, splendid in purple. Foscarini, a Byzantine emperor, came in with a Theodore made in the U.S.A. who smelled of gin fifteen feet away and walked like a golf champion. Then came the three ardent beaux, who devotedly kissed the hand of the *dogaressa*; Henri de Mantignac, a royal musketeer; Sir Reginald, Falstaff swollen with padding beneath his purple doublet; and, finally, Erich Krause, in coat of mail, a ferocious knight of the medieval Saint Vehme.

All the windows with their octagonal panes were thrown open, spreading over the Grand Canal. The buzz of conversation was punctuated with bursts of laughter and the jazz music with its bizarre wails. Jimmy had placed the two orchestras behind the statues of Victory at each end of the immense gallery. This served to fill the hall with the ultra-modern rhythms—the syncopations of the clarinettes, the racket of the traps and the burlesque blare of the saxophones sounding the only false notes in this Venetian symphony.

Four hundred people were already pushing into the huge *salons* of the Rezzonico when Nina Florelli and the Commander made their theatrical entrance: Solomon, son of David, and Balkis, Queen of Sheba, a living display of gorgeous gems. Then, as the supper hour crept near, and the time for Lady Diana's coronation approached, she escaped by a secret door and reached her boudoir. In a state of high excitement she rang for Emma.

"He is not yet here," she said to her maid.
"What time is it?"

"Ten minutes of twelve, Milady."

"Get Beppo, quickly."

The gondolier arrived. Lady Diana ordered him :

"Take the *Triton* right away and go to the rio of the Apostles and try to find out if the Count has returned and whether he is coming! Do the best you can and come back. *Presto! Prestissimo!*"

The gondolier disappeared. Lady Diana said to Emma:

"He should not be more than a quarter of an hour. When he comes send Edward to get me. I *must* know. This indecision is unbearable."

She went back to the ballroom and forced a brilliant smile, mistrust in her heart. Ruzzini's silence was torturing her. That friendly letter, so very short and not actually promising to come, was far from satisfactory.

Between two dances Jimmy asked in a half-whisper:

"Well, Diana, have you chosen your doge?"

"Yes."

"Who is he?"

"You'll see when the time comes."

A quarter of an hour went by. Lady Diana vainly awaited the gondolier. Supper was to be served in five minutes. What could she do? It occurred to her that she need not be crowned until dessert was served. Many things can happen in an hour.

She ordered the *maître d'hôtel* not to announce supper for ten minutes and was about to join a group of laughing friends when Edward approached and made her a discreet sign. She excused herself and reached her boudoir where Beppo was waiting.

"Well?" she asked, her heart in a flutter.

"The Count returned from Milan as expected."

"Ah!"

"But he left again almost immediately. He stayed only long enough to leave his luggage in his apartment."

Lady Diana's relief had been brief indeed. She exclaimed :

"What! He left again—in costume?"

"No, Madame, in street clothes. He went on board the *Beatrice*."

"Where was he going?"

"His servant did not seem to know."

Lady Diana's disappointment was so great that she suddenly felt a desire not to reappear in the ballroom. All that mass of costumes, that artificial gaiety, those conversations, those dances, that jazz, seemed hateful to her. To smile at all those people, to joke for no reason, to listen politely to the stupid remarks of her cosmopolitan guests, seemed more than she could bear. No! She would not go back into that Tower of Babel. Beside herself, she fell limply into an armchair.

Emma strove to console her :

"Milady, don't give up hope. It is quite possible that the Count had something important to attend to before coming here. He knows very well that a party like this on Redemption Night always lasts until daybreak."

After all, there was something in what Emma said. Lady Diana sighed. She hesitated a few seconds. It was not a desire for pleasure which took her back to the party, but a supreme call upon her will-power. She scarcely knew herself. She, the care-free Madonna of the Sleeping Cars, who had always dragged at her chariot wheels a hundred different admirers, was suddenly losing her self-control! For her to tremble in her boudoir like a débutante deceived on the evening of her first ball! Something was wrong, some spring had snapped in the confines of her will. She must regain her domination, marshal the straying forces of her powerful personality. She beat her pretty hands furiously on the armchair, then arose.

"You are right, Emma, if he comes, he comes. If not, *mektoub!*"

She would have supper with the masqueraders. She would listen without being bored to the "ach's" and the "so's" of the Germans, the "gee's" of the Americans, the "*Hein's*" of the French, the "da's" and the "*niet's*" of the Russians, the "*prego's*" of the Italians; the pointed laughter of the Latins, the heavy laughs of the Germans, the slow laughs of the Yankees, and the subtle smiles of the Slavs. The nocturnal debauch below called her to come down among the financiers dressed as pirates, the diplomats apeing Robert Macaire, the *nouveaux riches* costumed as Asiatic satraps, and the idlers decked out as old-time dandies. Their jokes would make her forget her sentimental distress. She arose, put on some more powder, replaced her "assassin's" patch, sprayed perfume on the snow of her wig and went down.

Supper was about to begin. The little tables were already occupied. The table of honour shone beneath the lights—fireworks of silver and multi-coloured glass, loaded with flowers that drooped their heads in the warm night air. The Prince d'Aspoli, dressed as the Grand Inquisitor, escorted by Foscari and Barbarigo, appeared carrying a long parchment sealed with the arms of the Council of Ten. Foscari was holding the crown and Barbarigo held a conch-shell, iridescent as mother-of-pearl, the symbol of Lady Wynham's mystic marriage with the Adriatic. A blue spotlight powdered Lady Diana with its soft brilliance as she sat on her throne above steps strewn with black iris and white roses. The Prince, in red satin, stood before her with his two *aides-de-camp*, on bended knee, with outstretched arms. Aspoli then read the burlesque formula of the ceremony in three languages, interrupted continually by joyous cries, bravos and enthusiastic exclamations. The young

Americans, led by Jimmy, made more noise than anyone. They shouted the "Rah! Rah!" of their college and whistled vigorously. The jazz band played national anthems to the rhythms of foxtrots and "shimmies." The crowd began to move about among the tables. The Columbines and the Carmens, the Harlequins and the Mignons left their chairs to go back to the floor. But before the ices were served, the Grand Inquisitor climbed upon a table and proclaimed :

"Ladies and gentlemen, we have come here this evening to consecrate as *dogaressa* the most beautiful of beautiful women, the charming Lady Wynham, the Ambassadors of Scotland to the Adriatic Shores. There is but one more favour that we ask of her bounty : that she choose a doge who will share with her this night, amidst the music and song, her omnipotent sceptre. The frogs of the fable demanded a king ; the guests, *Dogaressa*, demand a doge ! "

From all sides came cries :

"A doge! A doge! Yes! Si! Hurrah! hoch!"

Lady Diana, a trifle pale, arose and answered :

"When dessert is served, my dear friends, I will fulfil your wish. I will give to the Pearl of the Lagoon a worthy successor to the masters of the Ducal Palace. At dessert, and not before."

Obviously, she was trying to gain time. Some people protested; others acquiesced, but the servants appeared with the platters and the objections died down; supper began.

Lady Diana, seated between Prince d'Aspoli and the handsome Foscari, scarcely ate. She hoped, despite her fears, that she would suddenly see the man she was waiting for, whom she would place upon her throne before the astonished eyes of all Venice. To create a surprise like this suited her taste. She who had once, at a charity *matinée* at

the Garrick Theatre in London, danced to pagan rhythms, almost naked, for no other reason than to shock the members of the aristocracy, would naturally enjoy creating such a sensation.

But would Ruzzini come? She took a furtive look at the Byzantine Emperor's wrist-watch and saw that it was a quarter of one. Her throat became dry. She was unable to eat the food before her. Every passing minute increased the heart-rending disappointment, for she could hardly hope that Ruzzini would appear at this late hour. And yet? Was not a man so mysterious capable of almost any deed?

When the ices were being served she summoned up enough courage to tell her guests that because there were so many in the company who were qualified to be doges, she would not make her decision until two o'clock. More protests, more ribald laughter. The newspaper men whispered friendly reproaches in her ear. They said their reports would be late for the morning editions. She politely and definitely refused to submit to the exigencies of the press.

All of a sudden the orchestras drowned the tumult in the maddening outburst of a foxtrot. The guests began to dance again. Lady Diana, surrounded by Jimmy and his young friends, was smiling nervously at their schoolboy jokes when Edward respectfully signalled to her from a distance. She hurried to him, and he led her into a quiet corner where he handed her, on a small tray, a blue envelope marked "personal."

"Milady, pardon me for disturbing you, but this just came, and I supposed you would want it."

"Give it to me quickly."

Lady Diana, with a beating heart, disappeared in the corridor leading to her apartment, opened the envelope and read these lines:

"Madame :

"I know you expect Count Ruzzini at your fête this evening. I regret to inform you that he cannot be present. If you wish to know the reason, you have only to leave your guests for half an hour and follow the bearer of this message.

"Respectfully yours,

The signature was illegible. Lady Diana read it twice. The note was couched in perfect English, but it was not that of an Englishman. It was an astonishing type of handwriting—regular, cuneiform. It made one think of those illuminated manuscripts composed in fifteenth-century Spanish monasteries.

Indifferent to the consequences, Lady Diana called Emma, wrapped herself in a black cloak and had herself taken to the bearer of the message. It was the mechanic of the *Beatrice*.

Without a word he helped Lady Diana into the motor boat and zigzagged his way through the hordes of gondolas toward the rio San Luca. In a few minutes he had reached the Saccardi house. Lady Diana instantly recognized it from Jimmy's description.

"Where are you taking me?" Lady Diana demanded.

"I don't know, *signora*," replied the mechanic, who appeared to be a model of discretion.

He led his companion up a stone stairway and rang the bell. The little old woman opened the door. She showed no surprise, but asked Diana to enter and go up one flight. In a dark hallway she stopped and knocked on a door with a glass transom. A voice immediately replied :

"Come in."

The old woman made a gesture to Lady Diana to enter. A man was waiting for her—a man in a black cassock with a long tanned face, a blue chin

and extraordinarily brilliant eyes beneath thick brows. The man arose and bowed with perfect courtesy. He was very tall and, in spite of his ugliness, of marked distinction. He had a beautiful amethyst ring on his left hand, a hand fine and supple, a prelate's hand habituated to the gesture of benediction. He asked :

“ Have I the honour of addressing Lady Wyham? ”

“ Yes, monsieur. Who are you? ”

The man in black offered his visitor a straight-backed chair and standing gravely before her, a sombre shadow which dominated her by its height, he introduced himself :

“ Antonio de Salas, member of the Society of Jesus. ”

Chapter Seven

A REVELATION IN THE MAISON SACCARDI

THIS particular room in the *maison* Saccardi was even more commonplace than the others. However, although banal, it was very simple. The walls had the deadly pallor of a drowned man. In the corner on the right was a Louis-Philippe bed—a nest that held the great egg of a thick eiderdown quilt. On the bare bureau of shiny old wood, an altar had been improvised. A silver crucifix stood on an ebony pedestal between two empty candlesticks. The light that hung from the ceiling like a spider on its thread, brutally emphasized these inhospitable surroundings.

Lady Diana was seated in her straight chair. She considered this dark man—so imposing with his great height and the authority of his expression—with surprise not unmixed with fear. Her eyes were still dazzled by the display at the *palazzo*, and her ears were still ringing with the laughter and the profane music. She was not yet accustomed to this austere room, so cell-like, and to the silence which seemed ominously to pervade the house.

What a contrast! And how right Ruzzini had been when he had remarked that evening on the canal that romance was not yet dead, that even the telegraph had not sufficed to kill it. She had only to come to Venice to have Fate entangle her in an unsuspected adventure, and to have that adventure snatch her from the frivolities of her worldly pursuits.

But Lady Diana was not the type of woman who trembles at the unexpected. She gazed fearlessly out of her blue eyes at the Jesuit and spoke first :

"You, Father, are the person who sent me that astonishing message?"

"Yes, Lady Wynham."

"I say 'astonishing' because I don't quite understand the reason. Count Ruzzini had practically promised to be present this evening at the Rezzonico Palace. It seems to me that if, for some reason or other, he found it impossible to come, he could have made his own excuses without calling on you. A moral preceptor undertakes to explain the shortcomings of his pupils: is Ruzzini, then, similarly dependent on you?"

"You are quite just in your criticisms, Lady Wynham, and I hasten to add that Ruzzini, in this very room, before leaving for Trieste two hours ago, gave me a letter addressed to you in which he doubtless expressed his regrets at failing to be at the *palazzo*."

"Well?"

"So far you have not received that letter because I did not see fit to entrust it to the Count's mechanic to take to you."

Lady Diana drew herself up in astonishment. She tapped the hardwood table with the tips of her fingers and exclaimed :

"Oh, this becomes more serious. So you take it upon yourself to intercept other people's correspondence? You have a most extraordinary conception, Father, of the customs of civilized society. I know that the Society of Jesus is a sword with the hilt in Rome and a far-reaching point, but I scarcely anticipated having my frail person menaced by so powerful a weapon. I beg you to give me the letter which was addressed to me."

"Your wish shall be granted, Lady Wynham."

Father de Salas opened a drawer and handed

Diana an envelope. She recognized Ruzzini's writing and remarked ironically :

"Oh, you haven't opened it?"

"I would never permit myself to do such a thing."

The Jesuit's reply disconcerted Diana. She rapidly read Ruzzini's apology for having failed to keep his promise and said to the Reverend Father :

"I still don't understand why you failed to send me at eleven o'clock a letter which you calmly hand me at one in the morning."

"For two reasons, Lady Wynham. The first is that by acting as I have, I have practically forced you to come to see me and to listen to what I am about to tell you. The second is that had you known two hours ago what you know now, you might have tried to see Ruzzini. It is even possible that your extraordinary charms would have sufficed to keep him from his duty, which was to go to Trieste to-night. In a word, Lady Wynham, I consider myself extremely wise to have removed from his path a siren whose charm is irresistible and whose influence is pernicious."

"Are you laughing at me, Father?"

"No, Lady Wynham. Nothing is farther from my thoughts than sarcasm, this evening. Light conversation would be entirely out of place at so serious a moment."

Father de Salas, who had been walking up and down as he talked, his hands clasped behind his back, suddenly stopped. His emaciated face accentuated the sternness of his features. He spoke solemnly :

"Lady Wynham, you must cease to interest yourself in Count Ruzzini."

A long period of silence reigned in the room, the silence which precedes the storm. Hostilities had commenced between the trembling *dogaressa* and the resolute Jesuit. Two types of pride were clashing ;

two wills were about to cross swords. Lady Diana threw back her cloak from the rose and gold brocade of her gorgeous costume and, with that defiant attitude which speaks louder than words, she laughed :

"Really, Father? By the command of your order Count Ruzzini is wiped out of my life! I know, I understand perfectly. *Ad majorem Dei gloriam*. But, Father, in opposition to your motto I have another to advance, my Love and my Right. The carnal and the spiritual are in the arena together, *cestus* in the hand, vindictiveness in the heart. I call that fair play."

"Don't laugh, Lady Wynham. I talk to you with the assurance that I am doing right."

"I cannot help laughing. You counsel me to give up Ruzzini. Why should I? Am I a reprobate undermining the virtue of a Telemachus confided to your care? Am I doing something vile because I enjoy the company and conversation of a nobleman who happens to please me? Does the Society of Jesus govern the entire world, and must I subject myself to its dictation? I have been told, Father, that you and your companions sometimes dream of gaining universal control of the minds of men. It is then true, since you see fit to rally around you the black phantoms that obey your opportunism in order to attack a feeble woman whom Fate has thrown across the roadway of your plans?"

"I do not oppose myself to you, Lady Wynham. I stand behind you and address you, not with the voice of command, but with the tone of suggestion. I make no threats—would I have the moral right to do so? I advise, I exert no force. I signal to you from a distance."

"I quite understand you, Father. You use another name for the same thing. I know very little of the secret instructions left you by the late

Ignatius Loyola, Esq. I realize perfectly that in your eyes I am only a frivolous woman, a fly-by-night who expands under ballroom lights and stains her ancestral crown in the mud of forbidden pleasures. But don't think for a minute that, ignorant as I may be of your religious teachings and your practices you can win me over either by clever arguments or by the impressive formality of the robe you wear. I prefer the clearness of my complexion to the enjoyment of a pure conscience."

"Do you not believe, Lady Wynham, that the condition of your conscience might prove the ruin of that complexion of which you are so proud? And do you believe that the warning I have just given you is inspired by some ignoble motive?"

The battle was becoming more and more furious. A symbolic picture for the boarders at the Villa Medici! The combat between Profane Love and Divine Inspiration in the sordid setting of a frowning house on the bank of a dark canal! Lady Diana was no longer mocking. The pretension of this disciple of the Black Thought was unbelievable to her; his intervention seemed incongruous. That a mere stranger—even clothed with the prestige and authority given him by his connection with the Deity—that a mere mortal in a black gown should dare to interfere with her love affairs constituted for Lady Diana an intolerable offence. The atheist in her rebelled; the epicurean, in the true sense of the doctrine, was outraged before such impudence.

"Really, Father, one must come to this country to experience such indignities to one's personal liberty. Where I live, at least, personal liberty is a sacred thing. Have you forgotten that I was born on that island which gave the *habeas corpus* to the world? Your remarks pass the limits of reality and enter the realms of the burlesque. No one in the world has ever dared to advise me as to

my behaviour. I have never actually done wrong, nor good either for that matter. As to the cardinal virtues, I take a neutral stand. The only things on earth which guide me are the laws of my fancy and the dictates of my extravagances. If I did not respect the costume you are wearing, I would not hesitate to leave this room without listening to another word from you."

Father de Salas had submitted imperturbably to this attack from his pretty visitor and now replied with the same accent of haughty serenity:

"I quite understand, Lady Wynham, that my words have been unusual and a trifle shocking to a woman like you. I have only expressed myself with the crudity of one of God's servants, incapable of painting the truth with pretty colours. But please allow me to continue. In the present circumstances I am acting just as much in your interests as in those of Count Ruzzini. Believe me, I beg you. Leave him to the important mission which now absorbs him."

"But who are you? What rôle can you be playing in his life which gives you such an intimate interest in his future?"

"That of a friend, Lady Wynham, neither more nor less than that of a friend."

"Are you quite sure that that word is not written 'friend' and pronounced 'accomplice'?"

"Yes, complicity exists where two men are bound together for the sake of justice."

"Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, for instance?"

"I am invulnerable to your sarcasm, Lady Wynham. As Ruzzini's friend, I say to you once again: keep out of his life."

"But——"

"Oh, I know. So far he has been strong enough to resist the fascinations of your personality, but the flesh is weak. I have seen enough of you to be

assured that if you persist in seeing him, he will succumb. Oh, no, don't protest. I read hearts, madame. My lonely life, consecrated to religion, has not atrophied in me the knowledge of the human soul nor of the power for evil hidden beneath the charms of beauty. Everything in your attitude reveals to me your firm decision to add Ruzzini to your list of victims. I know something of your past, Lady Wynham. In our Society, we are more or less informed of the characters of women of your class. We know, for instance, that the beautiful Scotch lady, in whose honour the holy name of the Madonna has been spiritually profaned, has more victims chained to her chariot than a Roman dictator returning triumphant along the Sacred Way. In Paris, in London, in Vienna, in Madrid, your exploits are noted as marvels in the great book of temporal love. We have learned to mistrust so dangerous an adversary to our cause and we fear that Ruzzini will not prove immune to the attractions of a woman such as you!"

Lady Diana had a fresh access of defiance:

"You are right, Father, I believe you have divined my intentions. Ruzzini is the one man I want, and I have made up my mind to love him. Love breeds love, you know! My love for him will find its echo in the very depths of his soul. Neither your warnings nor your threats shall stop me from realizing my desire."

"Please, Lady Wynham, don't speak again of threats. The days of the Inquisition are past. My intervention is a purely spiritual one. I have no desire to strangle you. I simply hoped to convince you by my arguments. In my profession we never try to frighten people, we merely try to win them over to our side."

"Up to now your arguments amount to just this: that I should allow Ruzzini to follow his straight and narrow path. You talked about the

triumph of justice. Is justice antagonistic to love?"

Father de Salas came a little nearer to Lady Diana and said :

"The justice of which I was speaking is irreconcilable with *your love*."

And as Diana looked at him with astonishment, he went on :

"Lady Wynham, you belong to that nation which Ruzzini is going to fight because the honour of his own race exacts it. That is all I have to say."

"You speak of fighting; I thought that peace reigned on earth?"

"Peace is a mask which Europe wears and which is being perpetually eaten away by the incurable leprosy of war, that war which never ends in spite of all the treaties and all the leagues of which the human mind has been able to conceive. Peace and good-will between men! Deceptive words! Hostility between people, bitter, hypocritical, concealed, is a poisoned stream running beneath the grass of a deceptively healthy field. I who am a fervent believer who adores the all-powerful and long-suffering God, I admit that with sorrow. Did not Marcus Aurelius say concerning the human vices: 'Such is the order of Nature. To ask any other state would be to expect the fig tree to bear other fruit. All that is but a stench and putrefaction in a shroud.' Consequently, Lady Wynham, though we are unable to change lions into lambs, we still have the higher duty of fighting for justice and the chastisement of the guilty."

"Chastisement of the guilty? Who is guilty?"

"A fellow countryman of yours, Lady Wynham, a man who has not only dishonoured the name of Ruzzini, but who has committed a crime which common law has never allowed to go unpunished."

"Father, a minute ago you spoke of justice. You should have said 'vengeance,' for it seems to me

that this is a matter of satisfying vengeance rather than honouring justice. I gather that it is not your principle to turn the other cheek?"

"Lady Wynham, our great Lessius said that quibbling is permissible when there was a good reason for using it."

"And who is the man from my country whom Ruzzini intends to punish?"

"His name is unimportant, Lady Wynham. Let it suffice you to know that he exists and that justice will be done!"

Lady Diana had arisen. She asked:

"Is it in this queer place that you do your secret plotting for the sacred cause of justice?"

"Yes. But discretion necessitated that; during the war the adversaries camouflaged their reciprocal preparations. It is on this very site that, in 1537, Loyola and his six collaborators met to work out the details of the future Society. I may add that I have broken one of our resolutions in permitting you to come here this evening. Ruzzini shall remain ignorant of the fact, if you wish. But it seemed to me that my duty demanded that I warn you so that you might have time to reflect before carrying your adventure with my friend any further. If you persist, Lady Wynham, I declare to you that you will expose a loyal individual to the most tragic conflict, and that you will also risk undergoing the most cruel suffering yourself. My faith as a Christian has been my leader in my actions. I can say no more."

"Father, I appreciate your good intentions. But, no less solemnly, I declare to you that nothing will change my desires or my plans. Love is stronger than reason and danger has never made it change its course."

"That is most unfortunate, madame."

"I want to ask you one more question: you state that I would expose Ruzzini to a tragic conflict.

I assume that you are referring to that pretty brunette who lives in his apartment on the rio of the Apostles, who accompanied him as far as the train when he left for Milan and who was present the other evening at a secret conference in this very room?"

Father de Salas looked at Lady Diana with surprise:

"It is quite apparent that you have been well informed."

"You know this woman to whom I allude?"

"Yes."

"I shall then expose myself to the resentment of his mistress if I persist?"

Father de Salas made a gesture of surprise. He regarded his beautiful visitor haughtily and answered gravely:

"Lady Wynham, you are quite mistaken. The lady to whom you refer is not the mistress, but the sister, of Count Ruzzini."

Chapter Eight

THE END OF THE FÊTE

LADY DIANA left the Saccardi house and found the mechanic waiting for her at the foot of the stairs. She scarcely knew what she was doing. A veritable chaos raged within her. Astonishment, anxiety, the desire and the fear of knowing the truth, along with the wish to triumph and the uncertainty of winning, were all wrestling in her mind where plans, thoughts, passions and aversions were playing havoc. She said to the sailor :

“Go slowly to the Rezzonico and pass by the *Fondamenta Nuova*. Go slowly. I want to enjoy the evening air.”

She needed time to meditate before returning to her palace filled with music and laughter. Seated in the stern of the launch, on the leather cushions in the glass and mahogany cabin, she could not put from her mind the vision of that high dignitary of the Society of Jesus—the heretic tortured before the Grand Judge of the Tribunal never again forgot the implacable face of his torturer. The eyes of Father de Salas haunted her, eyes which never had ceased to bore through her with their sombre flame. She could still see him pacing the bare room, stopping suddenly, a huge creature, almost superhuman as he gazed at her between the crucifix and the faded curtains. After all, what an extraordinary personality he had and how much of an anachronism he was in a world where the badge of equality vied with the banality of desires and the egotism of appetites!

While the boat wound its way between the black houses, she tried to understand the reason for Father de Salas's intervention. Was it merely a polite ruse by which Ruzzini was telling her that he wished to be let alone? She could not bring herself to believe that, and concluded that the Jesuit had acted of his own accord. But to what purpose? Was he acting disinterestedly, was he actuated by an exaggerated misogyny? Then again, why should a religious man push Ruzzini into what really amounted to a *vendetta*? Whom did he want to punish, and how did he intend to go about it? So many problems which Father de Salas's reticence had left unexplained!

There was one thing which impressed Lady Diana more than any other, that was Ruzzini's hatred for England. Although he had never expressed his sentiments about the British while conversing with her, she realized that the Jesuit's remarks in that regard concurred with the report of Krause. It seemed that the Italian nobleman cherished a secret hatred for the English, a tenacious hatred which had governed all his acts for several years. The realization had a strange effect on Lady Diana. It seemed to make the man more attractive than ever. One day in London she had said laughingly to Prince Séliman: "From love to hatred is but the length of a bedroom."

As a matter of fact, in her amorous eyes, the sentiments of the nobleman toward her countrymen made no difference. Why should she be annoyed because he chose to punish one of them for some wrong he had committed? But she was hurt because he had not deemed her worthy of his confidence, and because he could have thought that she would reproach him for satisfying a justifiable desire for vengeance.

The *Beatrice* entered the Grand Canal. It had passed the Bragora Bridge. Lady Diana, very

tired, evoked the memory of her last nocturnal promenade with Ruzzini on that silent, deserted lagoon which, to-night, was a mass of lighted gondolas. When would she see Ruzzini now? Was it decent, after Father de Salas's sermon, to force herself into the life of this reserved Venetian? He had already blocked out with her the preliminaries of a flirtation. But did he intend to carry it on? What then? Was Lady Diana to see herself, for the first time in her life, disdained, humiliated, abandoned by the man to whom she had accorded all the premises of a magnificent passion? Frightful anguish that weighed upon her heart! Exasperating uncertainty that cheapened her fête, saddened the present, and already spread its dark clouds over her future.

She made a sudden resolution not to reappear in the ballroom. An invisible *dogaressa*, she would leave her guests to a thousand and one conjectures while she departed by an early morning train. Verona? Padua? The Lakes? It made little difference. The point was that Venice was intolerable and the Rezzonico Palace had suddenly become a prison. She would leave Jimmy to his cocktails and would seek repose of mind and peace of heart in temporary solitude. At any rate, she would try.

Furtively, she entered the *palazzo* which hummed like an overturned hive of bees and tiptoed to her boudoir. Suddenly, hurried footsteps sounded in the corridor, and Emma entered in great agitation.

"Milady! he is here!"

Lady Diana made a disgusted gesture and said:

"Of course; they want me downstairs. Tell Jimmy to go back and amuse himself and don't tell him that I have just come in. Go quickly."

"But, Milady, you are mistaken. I am not speaking of Mr. Jimmy, but of Count Ruzzini."

Lady Diana started and a death-like pallor crossed her face.

"What?"

"The Count arrived half an hour ago. He refused to go into the ballroom because he was not in costume, and he asked to speak to me. I told him that Milady would surely return very shortly —"

But Lady Diana was not listening to Emma; she had rushed to the door of the boudoir and halted on the sill. There, in travelling clothes, stood the Italian nobleman. He gazed with admiring eyes at Lady Diana mute with surprise, and kissed her hand with unexpected fervour.

"What a marvellous apparition! What splendid beauty, *carissima!* A reincarnated *dogaresa!* Listen to me—your minutes are even more precious than mine. I can see that you are astounded to find me here after the note which I sent you a little while ago; I am leaving for Trieste this very night. But I could not leave without saying good-bye. I feared that my short note would not be enough, and I hoped that you would forgive me for appearing in person to express my deep regrets."

"Dear friend, I am so astounded that words fail me!"

Ruzzini looked uncomprehendingly at her black evening cloak.

"But where have you been? Your servant made me wait here and assured me you would not be gone long. You have been out?"

"I have just come from the rio San Luca where I have had an interview with Father Antonio de Salas."

Ruzzini scowled and queried:

"Antonio de Salas?"

Lady Diana repeated to him her conversation with the Jesuit. It was obvious that Ruzzini was in total ignorance of the occurrence, for he listened to Diana with great attention and when she had finished, he remarked:

"Apparently my friend Antonio de Salas has chosen to take a great deal of responsibility upon himself. But of this you can be sure: whatever he said was self-inspired."

"I do not doubt that."

"I regret his lack of discretion."

"Is it regrettable that I know a little more about you? Do I impress you as the sort of person who would hold against you your enmity toward my compatriots? Is not the pleasure which I derive from seeing you to-night the best proof that I am not offended with you, and that I am more than touched that you came to say good-bye to me before leaving for Trieste?"

Ruzzini had risen; he took Diana's hand and, before bestowing the formal kiss, held it in his own while he corrected her:

"Not good-bye, Lady Diana, *au revoir*. At least, if it would not displease you to go to Rome in two weeks? We can surely see one another there, and I will have the opportunity of demonstrating my confidence in you, my endless confidence. I would even like to explain certain things to you which I will leave to the impartiality of your judgment and the certainty of your discretion."

"Both are yours, Ruzzini. And when you know me better, you will not fear to trust me. Go wherever your duty calls you; my thoughts will follow you; and if my friendship can help you in the battle you are fighting, rest assured that I will not regret the blow directed at it this evening by a disquieting Jesuit."

Ruzzini pressed his lips to her extended hand; they stayed against the skin longer than they ever had before. He seemed on the point of adding something; instead, he suddenly opened the door and disappeared.

Then Lady Diana, restored to serenity by the inner joy of her recent emotions, threw her black

cape gaily on the sofa. She looked at herself in the mirror, outlined anew the red arch of her lips, powdered her hair and verified the position of her patch. Finally satisfied, she decided to return to the arena, where her admirers awaited her. With a light spirit and a heart intoxicated with happy anticipations, she went down the dark hallway and opened the door which led into one of the *salons*.

She was greeted by a burst of jazz in a discordant hullabaloo of raucous conversation. But nothing could disturb her now. The knowledge that she should soon see Ruzzini in Rome fortified her against the poison of boredom. Radiating beauty, more fascinating than ever, with ardent lips and glorified expression she plunged headlong into the hurly-burly like a joyous nymph about to battle with the waves in the midst of her court of dolphins and Tritons.

Chapter Nine

LADY DIANA IS PUT TO THE TEST

LADY DIANA was day-dreaming on a bench on the Palatine hill. The fires of the setting sun were powdering with their red-gold the petrified relics of the Roman Forum.

She was alone. The tourists had gone. Nothing disturbed the magic of the triumphal arches or the vanished graces of the house of the Vestal Virgins. The spectre of eloquence wandered about the rostrum without profane collision with the green tweeds of some Liverpool business man, and no indiscreet traveller was peering into the waters of the fountain of Juturne. The importunate had fled. Now phantoms could peer between the stones without soiling their intangible veils by contact with living beings.

Lady Diana was dreaming. With languid eyes, seated on the prow of the Palatine, she awaited Ruzzini. For an entire month in Rome, she had anticipated his arrival. Anxious but docile, she waited in hope. One minute she was devoured by doubt and the next revived by hope. The day she arrived in Rome she had received a telegram from Genoa, in which Ruzzini begged her to be patient. Unexpected business had delayed him. Nevertheless, he would soon be with her.

The days passed, quietly, magnificently, in the Eternal City. Lady Diana, with no news from Ruzzini, toyed with her impatience beneath the implacable sun and the sky of invariable blue.

She had left her hotel and taken an apartment

on the third floor of the house which forms the corner of the square of the Trinita del Monte and the Vicolo Mignanelli. She loved this place with its church crowned with towers and its obelisk adorned with a cross, a familiar happening in a city where Christianity has affirmed itself by nailing its own symbol to the petrified fingers of paganism. What she loved above everything else were the Specchi steps in their superimposed parentheses, seeming to escape from the stone boat grounded in the piazza d'Espagna. Every morning, she bought flowers from the girls who wandered up and down the stairways with roses, irises and pinks. It was a veritable Pelion of perfume on an Ossa of vivid colour.

Days went by and the lonely traveller received no word. Her friends were in ignorance as to her whereabouts. Jimmy Butterworth vainly telegraphed from Venice, to all the big hotels. She did not bother to reply to him. Like a nun, she cloistered herself in her apartment, enjoying the warm morning sunshine of Rome with its domes, its palaces, its gardens—a Rome still bathed in the splendour of its brilliant past.

She was waiting for Ruzzini. She wrote him letters which she never sent and, in that way, deadened the cruelty of uncertainty. Every evening when the radiance of Saint Peter's spread through the clear night air, when the sombre mass of the Castell' Sant' Angelo raised its great bulk crowned with the sword of Saint Michael toward the starry sky, Lady Diana dedicated all her thoughts to Count Ruzzini.

Her clear profile and her bare shoulders appeared on the balcony at the corner. Her long lashes covered her lovely, anxious eyes, and for some minutes she gave herself up to the cult of the absent. It was the passionate hour when all her being gave itself over to a man she scarcely knew,

when the silent offering of her body flew away in the night toward that inaccessible kingdom of lost kisses and embraces without a to-morrow. It was the symbolic marriage of two souls in the portico of the Cathedral where Dreams officiate.

After she had lost her desire to dart away in the dark of the Roman evening, she sat down at her table before a picture of the school of Giotto and she wrote. Her handwriting, elegant and delicate as the arabesques of her thoughts, ran rapidly across the mauve vellum. She wrote to Ruzzini :

“ I am waiting for you. You, the man I hardly know. I am waiting for you, vibrant with impatience, as though the closest bonds already bound our united souls. At this hour when, perhaps, you are in the throes of your mysterious mission, my thought flows about you. It circles about, curious and tenacious, for it is the thought of a woman. It hardly touches you, unaggressive as a forgotten perfume between the sheets of a love letter. It would fear to be seen for it is not Queen—it is Slave—already ! It makes itself invisible so as not to trouble you; it is silent with fear; it makes itself small in the hope that later it may creep into the hollow of your hand.

“ I am not alone in Rome. You are always with me—within the walls of the Ville Borghese when I dream of Canova moving his famous chisel over Pauline’s lovely throat, and in Saint John the Lateran when I kneel down to do homage to Borromini’s art. When I wander, moody and unhappy, you wander with me through the paths of the Pincio or, while I muse among the ilex trees of the Villa Medici. The golden evenings, when the sun sets behind Antium, make me unhappy because you cannot enjoy them with me; and my eyes are filled with tears because I must watch without you the parasol pines which shade the garden of the lake.

“ Ruzzini, oh Ruzzini, I call you so quietly, so quietly that even the swan on the placid water cannot hear me. I show you my body and my soul, saying : ‘ Look, this

is yours, and this, and still this. I can give you this because all this has lived, loved, suffered, vibrated, so that one day you might take all. Ruzzini, pity me, I am nothing but a poor woman who awaits you.' "

She was writing with all the fever that a passionate woman could know. She confessed her desires to an indefinite face; she was writing to a shadow, heretic, perhaps, to her faith. And, the letter finished, she slipped it in a drawer so as not to send it.

How many women's letters have thus remained enigmas to their addressees? How many letters, infinitely touching, passionately chaste, or simply human, have passed entire nights beneath the pillows of those who dared not dispatch them. The letters which one does not send—blind birds which sing their sorrowful song behind the bars of annihilation instead of carrying afar the consolation of their serenade.

* * * * *

The English Embassy was ablaze with light, the lanterns of the garden party spread their glow about the villa on the via Venti Settembre, and the two pathways through the park, separated by the central lawn, were illuminated with blue lights.

On this evening Sir Archibald and Lady Buckley were receiving Roman society and the more distinguished members of the British colony. Against her wishes, Diana had been compelled to accept Lady Buckley's insistent invitation. Tired and spiritless, she had allowed herself to be driven to the Porta Pia, resolved to make only a brief conventional appearance at the Embassy. General Sir Richard Brickbat, K.C.B., had offered to be her escort. Very red of face and flaxen-haired, the Major-General was a gregarious and joyous good

fellow, who, during the war, had spent most of his leaves drinking gin at No. 96 Piccadilly. As Military Attaché, he now paid less attention to the study of Fascism than to the savoury virtues of sparkling *falerno*, and astounded the Roman ladies with the ardours of his British temperament run wild.

"My dear Lady Wynham," he said as they climbed the broad stairway where hung the portrait of Queen Victoria, "I don't know how you feel about Italy, but, for my part, I trust that I shall never be recalled from Rome. Sometimes the Roman women are inclined to have thick ankles, but after all a woman does not hang to one's neck by her ankles."

"I see, General, that the solitary life of bachelors like yourself is only a myth. It is true, though, that a man likes to be alone for the sake of being alone and that a woman likes to be alone with someone. But since you know more about Roman society than I, tell me something about the beauties about us."

They had crossed the green *salon* and were seated in the ballroom behind one of the columns of red porphyry; the orchestra was playing in the balcony. The windows were open on the park and the sound of voices rose from the garden in front of the veranda.

"My dear friend, do you take me for a Roman newspaper? However, I admit that I frequent the Jockey Club, the *Parioli*, the dinners at the *Castello dei Cesari* and the teas at the Excelsior where one tries to get in a dance between two manifestoes of the Black Shirts. Look at that young woman in mauve over there. Pretty profile, hasn't she? An Alma Tadema corrected by Sargent. She is the Marchioness del Monte—Bianca del Monte—a very young widow courted by Prince Tomacelli, who is now talking with the Ambassadors. They

were at a dance together the other night at the Bonbonnière, and I heard them discussing delicious projects: '*Carissima*,' said the Prince, 'why not spend our honeymoon in Capri?'

"'Oh, you know that I am horribly frightened at the thought of being seasick,' protested the Marchioness.

"'Love,' said the Prince gravely, 'is the best remedy for seasickness.'

"Then the Marchioness made a little face and replied vivaciously: 'Possibly. It would be all right going perhaps. But how about the return journey?'

Lady Diana looked curiously at Tomacelli's sceptical fiancée and arose. It was warm in the *salon*. The Duke of Santa Croce, who had been presented to her by the Ambassador, offered to take her for a stroll in the park. He was still a young man, with a beard like that of Francis I framing his fine, pale face. He chatted with Lady Diana in the purest English as he sat down beside her on a bench at the edge of the blue-lit pathway. Couples went by them, groups of people talked together. The jazz, softened by the hangings of the *salon*, sent out intermittent syncopated cascades of sound on to the palms. The Duke of Santa Croce had taken a cigarette from his pocket. After lighting it, he said:

"Lady Wynham, one meets the most beautiful women in Rome at your Ambassador's and the most mysterious men in all the world."

Lady Diana's curiosity was aroused by the Duke's remark. She waited to hear more, but as he said nothing, she asked:

"What makes you say that?"

"Oh, nothing, Lady Wynham, except that there is a man here to-night whose activity intrigues me. What is the use of telling you more about it, since you don't know him."

"It is indiscreet to ask his name?"

"Not at all. It is Angelo Ruzzini."

Lady Diana experienced a sudden attack of trembling. She made a violent effort to control herself and attempted to say, in an almost indifferent tone: "Ruzzini? It seems to me I have heard that name somewhere."

"Count Angelo Ruzzini? He is a Venetian. You may have heard of him there?"

"I believe I have even met him. Yes, I am sure I have. A rather good-looking fellow, isn't he?"

"He is more than good-looking, he is extraordinarily handsome; a character, but very mysterious. Even his friends, like myself, no longer know what he does, what he wants or what he has on his mind. Ruzzini was born three hundred years too late in an Italy which has become too nationalized and too prosaic. In the time of the Sforzas, he might have overthrown all Lombardy."

"And is he here this evening?"

"I saw him arrive just as we came out. Would you like to meet him again, Lady Wynham?"

"Why not? I am curious to see your rare bird at closer quarters. A Venetian engaged in clandestine pursuits is not to be met every day."

The Duke disappeared to look for Ruzzini.

Lady Diana, with a furiously beating heart, relaxed in a deep chair. The shadows in the park concealed her pallor, a pallor which betrayed her uncontrollable emotion. The jazz music almost nauseated her, and the minor wails of the saxophone tortured the nerves beneath her trembling skin.

Suddenly she cried out. A hand was laid gently on her bare shoulder from behind her. The very contact was enough to make her tremble more violently. She turned. It was Ruzzini. He had approached her noiselessly, coming across the lawn. He looked at her without a word. He had slid his

hand down to her wrist beyond the bracelets of diamonds and sapphires, and now he held her in a masterful grip.

Lady Diana was incapable of speaking. She was fascinated by this apparition, so sudden, so disconcerting, so laden with presage. She gave up her hand, inert, to the grasp of the man for whom she had waited so many days, to whom she had written so many letters which, perhaps, he would never read, to that man for whom she had sent out into the evening so many thrills and desires.

Ruzzini leaned over her and, without so much as greeting her, as though he had left her five minutes before, said :

"Come to the end of the park; I must talk to you, Diana."

She arose and obeyed him without hesitation. It seemed quite natural to her to do whatever he wished. This was as much a law of nature as universal attraction. They passed a few groups of people and reached the end of the park. No one could see them. Ruzzini offered her a chair, then sat down beside her and took one of her little hands gently in his. He bent nearer to her so that she could see the brilliant black of his eyes and, speaking almost mouth to mouth, he said :

"Later, explanations, Diana—I will tell you the reason for my long silence. I will tell you everything. The mask I wear will fall at your feet, but this evening we have other things to do. Or at least I have, because I did not come to the garden party to drink champagne and exchange nonsense with the representatives of the smart set. Diana, I am going to put a brutal question to you. You shall see that I place my life and my honour in your hands. When I have finished speaking, you will be in a position either to help me or cause my arrest by speaking to your Ambassador. I am staking everything on your love."

Her temples icy and her throat dry, Lady Diana managed to murmur :

"Speak, Ruzzini."

"I have confidence in you; here is the story. We are informed that the Central Telegraph Office in Rome sent your Ambassador a short telegram this evening. It is absolutely essential that I be acquainted with the exact context of that telegram which has undoubtedly been decoded by now. There is no use in my making an attempt to obtain it. But you are a personal friend of Lady Buckley, and you can help me. Act as you see fit and employ all your diplomacy in my behalf. I shall be watching you from a distance. Return to the ball-room when you have finished your task, signal to me by opening and closing your feather fan twice. I will leave discreetly and will wait for you at the Trinita del Monte. Give me the key to your apartment and this little perfumed handkerchief which bears your crest. You will find me there, seated on your balcony, dreaming with the stars and breathing with closed eyes the essence of your dear perfume."

Lady Diana looked at Ruzzini. Anyone else who had dared to speak to her in such a fashion would have received an ironic smile as a final dismissal. But this was different. Ruzzini's astounding language failed to surprise her. It seemed quite natural. Without a moment's hesitation, she handed him her handkerchief and the key to her apartment, whispering simply :

"I will try."

She rose. Ruzzini suddenly took her small hands in his, raised them to his heart and said :

"Diana, I have won. But I'm a good sport. I will pay my debt a little later. Go."

Trembling with emotion, Lady Diana tried to speak, but Ruzzini was looking toward the palace, toward the veranda where people were moving

about. She quickly regained her self-control and walked down the pathway. Ruzzini followed a few steps behind. She felt his will like a powerful, irresistible emanation guiding her, pushing her toward that white palace where she was about to take the greatest risk of her life.

In the small green drawing-room she met Lady Buckley. The beautiful Ambassadors withdrew from the crowd of Romans who surrounded her in order to confine her attention to her old friend. In London they had known one another intimately. In Petrograd Sir Archibald Buckley had been First Secretary to the Embassy when the late Lord Wynham was the representative of His Majesty at the Court of Emperor Nicholas II. Lady Buckley and Lady Wynham had become intimate over caviar and *bortsch* under the admiring glances of grand dukes prostrated by their beauty. They knew too much of love to be estranged by jealousy. In their friendship there was no such thing as envy or resentment.

"Well, Diana," said the Ambassador, "have you decided to go into retreat in Rome?"

"No, Edith, but I am fed up with society. Its senseless activities have struck me as utterly fatuous this summer."

"My darling Diana, how you have changed! Who has brought about this miracle?—a man or a church? A lover or an archaeologist? Are you under the influence of the faith, or in the clutches of the devil?"

"As a matter of fact, I am in the power of that gnome known as Solitary Meditation. It is a halt between two caravans. The pool of water in the desert where the sinner stops to study her faults in the pure mirror of the spring."

They exchanged confidences. Ruzzini passed by with an Italian officer. Lady Diana scarcely saw him, but she could feel his imperious regard

vibrating through her and instantly stimulating her will.

"Let's go to your boudoir for a few minutes, Edith. I want to talk to you frankly about the political situation. Surely the present Ambassador to Rome owes that much to the former Ambassador to Petrograd?"

Lady Buckley began to laugh :

"It's true, isn't it, dear, we really are colleagues? The only difference between us is that I have stood by my guns while you, lucky woman, have evaded that career where one cultivates the orchids of lies between two curtseys."

"Don't speak so bitterly of lies, Edith; a lie is often merely an hypothesis of eleven o'clock which will be verified at noon."

"Let's go into my husband's private study."

They conversed like two professionals brought up in the *seraglio* of the Foreign Office :

"Is your First Secretary an agreeable chap? And how do you get along with the *Duce*? An astounding man, don't you think so? An Iron Hand in a black suède glove. Are you cordially received at the Chigi? Do you remember our intrigues at the Winter Palace with poor old Baron Frederics who has since been killed by the Bolsheviks? Ah, that horrible Russian drama! And how do you get along with the French Ambassador to Rome? They tell me he is a clever diplomat and a most distinguished man."

While they were talking, Lady Diana, seated at Sir Archibald Buckley's desk, was toying with the papers. All of a sudden, she made a gesture of apology and exclaimed :

"*Mon Dieu!* What sacrilege! I have been mixing up these important official documents without realizing what I was doing."

"Oh, important! Don't let's exaggerate, dear. You know that in reality we are nothing but figure-

heads of public opinion. I often tell my husband that. He takes himself so seriously, and I laugh at his vanity, his illusions. Tradition still tolerates us as it does the coachman of the Lord Mayor of London, with his wig and his gold braid. But in another century we will be behind the windows of the future Madame Tussaud, resuscitated from the cinders. For instance, my dear, here is a telegram from Downing Street which has to do with an affair of smuggling at Malta. The destroyer *Essex* seems to have had a little trouble with a small Italian cargo boat which failed to conform with the customs regulations. It's only another case of our Socialist party scenting the odour of Fascism. Ah, that little telegram is more serious. Archibald had it deciphered a little while ago. Just exactly what does it say?"

Lady Buckley lifted her lorgnette and read indifferently, half aloud :

"His Majesty's Government has decided to send the 8th Battalion of Scottish Rifles and the 2nd Battalion of Grenadier Guards to Alexandria. The transports *Bristol*, *Fingall* and *Arcadia* are now preparing for the voyage at Southampton. Please confer immediately with the Italian Government on the subject of contraband arms in Tripoli, with a view to reaching an understanding on the necessity of cutting off this source of supply from the Egyptian rebels."

"Oh, that's nothing sensational, after all. The insurrection on the Nile runs its course and will be suppressed in a month. *E Finita la commedia* in the theatre of the Pharaohs. The Sphinx returns to the prompter's box and the curtain falls on the pyramids!"

"You are more than optimistic, Diana. Archibald already sees all Islam aflame."

"Oh, your husband spends too much time read-

ing Schopenhauer. Tell him to try a little Mark Twain with his breakfast and a spoonful of Swift after lunch. But, my dear, this is perfectly frightful, I am keeping you from your guests. Let us hurry back to the ballroom. I like your Embassy, you know. It has an intimate and not too formal air. It reminds me of the American Colonial style."

"The Farnese Palace which the French occupy is too imposing. I prefer living with a few white peacocks in the park and a fish-pond in the centre of the lawn."

They had entered the ballroom by this time. Lady Buckley was immediately surrounded by new guests. Lady Diana was captured by Ruzzini's look which sought her from behind one of the columns of red porphyry.

She opened and closed her fan twice and smiled at the Duke of Santa Croce who offered her his arm and led her to a table where punch was being served. General Brickbat, K.C.B., elbowed his way to her side, closely followed by a secretary of the French Embassy who carried the fatuity of his office with inconceivable pride. Soon, a Fascist adorned with the insignia of the party and an American millionaire with gold-rimmed glasses completed the siege of Lady Diana who, impatient and nervous, dispatched the steel-tipped arrows of her pernicious wit at random.

It was one o'clock in the morning when she managed to escape. Her Rolls Royce, like a black meteor bound with nickel, sped along the deserted via Venti Settembre and swung about at the corner of the via Quattro Fontane. Lady Diana, absorbed in her thoughts, did not even look at the dark imposing mass of the Barberini Palace, surrounded by high palms, where Guido Reni's Beatrice Cenci implores the passers-by with the premature resignation of her youthful expression. The automobile

entered the via Sistina and came to a stop in the little square of the Trinita del Monte.

Her pulse racing, her hands trembling, Lady Diana ascended the stairs. The door of her apartment was ajar. She stopped for a second to catch her breath and then crossed the hallway. The dark *salon* was empty. She advanced in anguish toward the moonlit square which outlined the window opening on the balcony.

Ruzzini was there. Seated in an armchair, a cigarette between his lips, he awaited her. Lady Diana approached him. He did not rise, but took her icy hand that hung inert beneath the mass of gems. It was the possessive gesture of the master who caresses a docile young animal and gives it the reward it has deserved. He gazed on her and asked without preamble :

"Diana, what was in the telegram?"

Lady Diana recited the contents of the official dispatch word for word. Ruzzini again caressed her hand. Then, with his left hand, he drew from his pocket a folded slip of paper. He handed it to Lady Diana who, disconcerted, read these lines :

"His Majesty's Government has decided to send the 8th Battalion of Scottish Rifles and the 2nd Battalion of Grenadier Guards to Alexandria. The transports *Bristol*, *Pingall* and *Arcadia* are now preparing for the voyage at Southampton. Please confer immediately with the Italian Government on the subject of contraband arms in Tripoli, with a view to reaching an understanding on the necessity of cutting off this source of supply from the Egyptian rebels."

Lady Diana's surprise was so great that she dropped the paper on the balcony. She murmured, amazed :

"But—since you already knew, why did you have me——"

Ruzzini had risen abruptly to his feet.

"To judge the quality of your love," he said in a low voice. Then, seizing Diana's body in its ivory and gold brocade, he crushed her to his breast, adding :

"Diana, from this night I offer you the blood of my heart and the flesh of my body. I give you my life. Do what you please with it."

Nerveless, seized with a sudden vertigo, she dropped her head to Ruzzini's shoulder and offered her chilled lips to the passionate heat of his kiss. For several minutes they stood on the little balcony, entwined in each other's arms, facing the Eternal City in its sleep. Paganism and Christianity in secret complicity approved their love beneath the halo of the consenting night. The cupolas of the silent city were luminous. The two watch towers of the Trinita del Monte and the obelisk in the gardens of Sallust blessed their first and unforgettable embrace.

Chapter Ten

A TRAGEDY IN ENGLAND

THE bells on the Roman churches were ringing. Brown pigeons drew arabesques on the morning sky above the sombre dome of the Augusteo. The first warmth of the day pervaded the room through the transparent curtains of the open window.

The bed was like a landscape of the moon where the white disorder of the sheets lay in relief upon the craters of the voluptuaries stretched beneath.

Ruzzini talked, holding his happy prisoner in his arms. As he spoke, he contemplated the blue circles—witness to past ecstasies—shading Lady Diana's languid eyes. He caressed the blue-violet silk of her pyjamas which, opened over the pale smoothness of her breasts, made a harmony with the bloneness of her disordered hair.

"Diana, to me you are more beautiful than all the Reynoldses and all the Lawrences of which your country boasts so much. My Mediterranean eyes are ravished by your beauty; the diaphanous purity of your complexion eclipses the most beautiful skies of Sorrento and Amalfi. I can tell you this, now that you hold me like a gladiator palpitating in the arena, now that you have conquered my pride and mastered my will. I can tell it to you because you have made of a man once proud, self-sufficient, and jealous of his independence, a smiling, happy slave. Ah, Diana, I love you all the more because I resisted you so long. Last evening, while I was awaiting you on the balcony, I watched the stars; we Venetians are superstitious, you know. I was looking at the stars,

and I said to myself : ' Which is hers and which is mine ? ' Suddenly two meteors crossed the constellation of the Lyre. They converged. I thought they were going to meet—then, suddenly, they went out and disappeared in the eternal shadows of infinite space. But they had almost touched, and that symbolic kiss of two shooting stars under the dark vellum of that beautiful summer night had, for me, the sweetest of presages ; my soul was satisfied and serene. I waited for you with peace and joy in my heart. I knew that last night would be *our* night, and that whatever might be our destiny, we would never regret having lived it."

Diana listened, intoxicated, to Ruzzini's words. Abandoning herself like a child to his embrace, she gave herself over to that happiness which she had so long awaited.

She made herself very small in Ruzzini's arms. Her golden hair, disarranged by the caprices of a passionate night, shadowed her forehead. A smile of supreme gratification spread over her parted lips. Ruzzini contemplated her. His black eyes fixed themselves in turn on the perfect outline of that adorable mouth, on the pure line of the straight little nose, on the charming contour of her breast which peeped indiscreetly from its blue prison. For a docile slave, Ruzzini held his prey fast. He enjoyed his own defeat, this conquered *condottiere*.

The Roman Sunday was announced by glorious carillons. The song of the bells seemed to announce to the astonished worshippers the birth of a great love in a room with a ceiling of antique yellow. What a magnificent couple ! Eros should have proclaimed to the shadows of the Forum this marvellous ascent to the heights of passion !

Time passed. Diana and Ruzzini, in the benevolent coma which engulfed them, did not move. From time to time the net curtains fluttered in the

warm breeze—a wedding veil trembling at the remembrance of recent caresses. Rose petals, falling one by one, seemed to punctuate the litany of passing hours.

Suddenly Lady Diana opened her eyes, and, clinging to the neck of her lover, said :

“Last evening, darling, you promised to tell me everything. But you are still wearing your mask. Last night, still, I loved an unknown domino from the carnival of Venice. Quick, tell me——”

“The awful hour has arrived then, Diana? Must we so soon break the charm of our enchantment?”

“Our enchantment is the test of everything, now——”

“Who can tell? Wouldn't you wait? To savour a little longer the illusion that cradles us, before we awaken to the hostility of realities?”

“Speak.”

“Woman! That eternally curious being who will sacrifice happiness to sorrow in her determination to see what is on the other side! Diana, you are an edition *de luxe* of the book of Eve. Living work of Canova suddenly brought to life in my arms, by Eros! Are you not afraid of plunging your two delicate hands in the black ashes of my past? Are you not afraid of finding things which will tarnish your sun and put bitterness in the cup of our kisses? The past of a lover is the secret room of a Bluebeard where hang the numberless corpses of his dead loves—the beautiful and the stupid, the intellectual and the sensual, the jealous and the mercenary ones. They are there, side by side, mummified by oblivion, petrified by the passage of time—that implacable monster who crushes memory in its jaws. Aren't you afraid of opening that mysterious casket full of dried tears, yellowed letters, and faded remembrances?”

“No, no! I want to know. So much the worse

if my heart bleeds; so much the worse if you kill it. But to suffer for you, my splendid lover, would be the most complete happiness; it would be to give even more wholly of my flesh so that you can the better mark it with the seal of your possession. I shall not know the full extent of my love until you have hurt me beyond endurance."

"Diana, what I have to tell you has, however, nothing to do with the secret book of my amorous life. It has, indeed, to do with a woman, but not a woman of whom you could ever be jealous. You will soon understand what I mean."

Ruzzini sat up against the pillow. Diana leaned her back against his drawn-up knees. He took her little hand in his and smiled at her gently. Before he began his recital, she leaned once more toward him to give him a preliminary kiss which he gathered slowly in the scarlet chalice of her mouth. Then he spoke:

"One year ago, the Countess Nicoletta Ruzzini, a relative of mine, left Venice, where she was accustomed to live, and went to London. Nicoletta was twenty years old. She was a brunette beauty with the complexion of a camellia—a sensitive and intelligent creature. She was a virgin. No unclean desire had ever stained her mind, in spite of the temptations which surrounded her, in spite of the score of admirers who paid court to her from the Lido to the *piazzetta*. She went to London to learn the language better and to accustom herself more to the world, under the chaperonage of her best friend, Mrs. Andrew Perkins, a leader of British society, of perfect reputation and exemplary conduct.

"For three months Nicoletta lived wonderful days as Mrs. Perkins's guest in her house in Regent's Park. Destiny seemed to be smiling at her, and life seemed to have for her its choicest flowers.

"One evening at Covent Garden an Englishman was presented to her. He was a colonel, still quite young—forty-four. He had served in Mesopotamia in the European war and afterwards brought to the British Intelligence Office the ability of his extraordinary mind. Diana, you must know exactly what this man was—a thorough *dilettante*, strange as that may seem to you with a khaki uniform; a prospector of men—and of women—an artist and a *dilettante*, adorned with the red insignia of the Staff under a Sam Browne belt. Strange, isn't it? The Great War did not teach us to look for individuals of such refinement of taste in the English Officers' mess, where a lover of good food is more common than a gourmet of psychology. However, this particular officer, whose name I will shortly tell you, has become the ace of the second British Office in the Orient. Fifteen years of travel and long sojourns in Syria, Arabia and Egypt, have made him an absolute authority on Moslem politics. He is the man who, with his friend Lawrence, 'invented' King Feisal and who has, until now, succeeded in controlling the Nationalists in Cairo. He speaks Arabic like a Bedouin. He is as much at ease in the great mosque of Mecca as you are in a drawing-room in Park Lane. He is a great Orientalist——"

Ruzzini added in a harsh voice :

"He is also a great criminal."

Lady Diana had shivered beneath the savage light which suddenly glowed in her lover's eyes. She repeated very low :

"A great criminal?"

But Ruzzini had already regained his calmness and, in the almost indifferent voice of a narrator of a fictitious story, he continued :

"So Mrs. Perkins presented the Colonel to Nicoletta. The Italian girl's beauty must have impressed him because he expressed a desire to see

her again. Two weeks later he gave a large dinner for the Countess Ruzzini in his magnificent residence near Hampton Court. A month later he asked Mrs. Perkins, Nicoletta's official chaperon, for the girl's hand in marriage. The young Countess Ruzzini had no particular liking for the Colonel. She considered him a very cultivated man whose conversation was interesting and whose presence was agreeable—nothing more. The elegant cynicism of this great traveller, fed on the scepticism of Pyrrho, separated him from her morally, while his physical aspect left her untouched by his attempts to attract her.

“On the other hand, the Colonel was terribly infatuated with Nicoletta. Her friendly efforts to discourage his advances failed to cure the passion of the Englishman, who seemed piqued by his gentle rebuffs. Then he conceived his plan. Profiting by the absence of Mrs. Perkins, who had gone to Dublin, he sent a telegram to Nicoletta, couched in these terms :

“Are invited by the Colonel for week-end at Hampton Court. Come Saturday. We will meet at his house. Love. Perkins.”

“Nicoletta, completely taken in, went to the mansion. The Colonel received her. He was surrounded by Nubian servants in a marvellous setting. The young girl was pleased beyond words and looked forward to a marvellous week-end under the protection of her chaperon. But Mrs. Perkins was not there. When Nicoletta expressed her astonishment, the Colonel—brimming with treachery—showed her a telegram from Dublin in which Mrs. Perkins informed them that she would not arrive until ten o'clock Sunday morning.

“They passed a very agreeable evening. The Colonel drew on all the resources of his wit. He

held his young and beautiful guest under a spell, in the shadows of the damask-covered furniture and the great Persian vases filled with orchids and black iris."

Ruzzini was silent. Lady Diana's anxious gaze searched his eyes, and she asked :

"And then?"

He violently pressed the delicate hand in his and added simply :

"And then the drama unfolded. You can divine it in all its horror—the crime of an Oriental *satrap* destroying a lily in his strangler's hands . . . Nicoletta escaped in the night and, mad with shame and moral suffering, made her way to London on foot. The next day, without even awaiting the return of her friend, who, to this day, knows nothing of the tragedy, she embarked for the continent and, a little bird with broken wings, came back to Venice where she fell into my arms."

Once more Ruzzini was silent, then, with half-closed eyes, his hand clutching the golden hair of his mistress, he concluded :

"Diana, the Colonel committed the most odious of crimes on Nicoletta, Countess Ruzzini. I, Angelo Ruzzini, have sworn on the altar of the Holy Virgin at Santa Maria della Salute, to avenge my sister."

Lady Diana received, with an intense cerebral sensuality, this superb vindictiveness of the man she loved. Although he who had offended the honour of the Ruzzinis was her compatriot, her soul already offered itself as accomplice to the hero of her most beautiful night. She had sustained the flame of the sombre look which darted from his dark eyes, and submitted, joyously, to the vice of his hand clamped on her wrist. She replied :

"Angelo—your conduct is just. I, who do not believe in God, am sure that He would approve the punishment of the criminal. I love you all the

more because you wish to avenge your sister, and I will do everything in my power to help you."

"Diana, if you follow along my path, you will wound yourself on the thorns of my Calvary. I say to you, there is time to leave me if you are afraid of soiling your hands or of shedding your blood. God knows I love you with all my soul. Were I to lose you to-night, I would only continue to live for the sake of the mission which awaits me, and I would die happily when I had accomplished it. . . . But it is because you are all mine, darling, it is because your safety, your physical and moral security mean more to me than my egotistical love—that I say to you to-day: Beware—if you follow me, your ancestral British heritage will be sacrificed on the altar of your passion. You will have to face without fear the fact of turning renegade to your king and your flag when you rally to the black standard which I shall soon raise before the Union Jack."

Abruptly, Ruzzini took Diana in his arms. He crushed the supple body in its sheath of violet blue against his breast and said:

"Diana, my heart breaks as I say the words: Go away! And yet, as I tell you to go, my lips are calling to you—my two arms are reaching out to you—my eyes implore yours. I drive you away, and I want you to remain."

Diana, in tumult, fastened her trembling hands about Ruzzini's neck and murmured:

"You are the flesh of my flesh. You have wiped out my past. You have brought me back to life with the consuming fire of your love. For your sake, I will cast aside my flag, my country and my friends. For you I will betray the rest of the world. From now on, I am your creature, obedient and faithful. Angelo, you are my beloved master and before you I bow my head with joy, my head that has never before been lowered."

Wrapped in each other's arms, they listened to the beating of their hearts melting together. Their contracted flesh, their tense nerves, relaxed in unspeakable sweetness, bathed in sunlight and sincerity. With tender gestures, Ruzzini caressed Diana's golden hair, her forehead and the charming oval of her tired face. In a voice which seemed to come from a great distance, she asked :

"Do you want to tell me the name of this British officer?"

Without interrupting the slow movement of his left hand which modelled the curve of her velvet breast, Ruzzini replied :

"Yes. It is Colonel Warren—Leslie Warren."

Lady Diana had to call upon a superhuman will power in order to suppress an exclamation. Her long lashes fluttered on her suddenly closed lids. Her heart beat so fast that she was afraid Ruzzini would notice her emotion. Leslie Warren! Leslie Warren! The name seemed to beat against her temples in time to the rapid rhythm of her blood. The bitter taste of the past came to her mouth. Chance, that cruel madman with empty eye-sockets, that headless moth which flutters about the four walls of our existence, had chosen this hour of perfect peace and ineffable happiness to make resound from beyond the *steppes* of memory, the name of one of her former lovers.

Chapter Eleven

SOMETIMES ONE SHOULD LIE

HER former lover? Not exactly that. She had never loved Leslie Warren. Their adventure had lasted as long as a winter's dusk. They had met one afternoon in Paris at the Cercle Interallié. The mauve sky above the Champs Elysées, criss-crossed by the dry branches of the trees, threw an iridescent light on the veranda by the deserted gardens. Seated side by side in two armchairs propitious for confidences, they had whispered cynical remarks.

Lady Diana was bored. Her life had been monotonous for three whole months. She was just in the mood to paint on the cold canvas of her life the little red flower of an adventure without an aftermath. She wanted to give way for an infinitesimal space to a momentary voluptuousness. Colonel Warren seemed to be the man chosen to give her this sensory short circuit. In the course of this first conversation they inventoried, like expert surgeons who lay upon the marble the viscera of a patient, a choice of possible or probable thrills.

Their conversation ended in a dinner in a private room, a dinner seasoned by the distant music of a jazz band, which insinuated itself, softened, through the walls hung with tea-rose silk.

The next day Lady Diana received a very beautiful Bible, superbly bound, with the Colonel's card and these words :

"My dear Diana—this colossal book to expiate your sin of last evening."

The next day the Colonel received a lovely edition of *L'Examen de Flora*, with Lady Diana's card and these lines :

"My dear Warren—this little volume to expiate your ignorance of last evening."

Ten times Colonel Warren had tried to see her; each time she had avoided him. She was disgusted with the vice and the insincerity of the man. She had made an error. She put it down to the account of "Profit and Loss" in her Great Ledger of Passing Fancies. Also, she had divined, with her almost diabolical perspicacity, the soul of a cad beneath the polished manners of the eclectic.

These bitter memories she turned over in her mind as she walked along the via Plebescito to the rendezvous which Father de Salas had given her at the Church of Gesu. A non-penitent sinner, she walked slowly along, her heart heavy with a mixture of happiness and anxiety. At last she was in love. She loved magnificently. But this superb love was already sowing the bitterness of anguish in her heart. Her lover was going to combat an enemy. Why then must this enemy be one who had once known the savour of her kisses? Why must there be that dark spot in the sun? Why that defect in the crystal?

Ruzzini should never suspect the truth. When she helped him body and soul in this terrible combat, he should have no distrust. And yet, at the very threshold of their love, a shadow outlined itself. Diana knew that she must keep silence, although with all her being she longed to confess. She who, until now, could handle the art of falsehood with the grace and dexterity of an Amazon with her bow, now wished to open her life to the Predestined Lover, and saw herself forced once more to dissimulate, to be silent. Was it not the decree of justice? Was not Destiny, like a tireless maestro, forcing her to listen to this false note in

the song of her new-found happiness in order to prove that one pays for everything—even those pleasures without a to-morrow—and to show her that, virtuoso of lies, she was condemned to carry her fetters with her through the flowery fields of her new-found Eden?

She climbed the steps of the baroque church. A stale odour of melted wax, carried by the draught from the door, brought her a faded smell of forgotten homilies. On her left, between four fluted columns of grey marble striped with gold, she saw the glass tomb of Ignatius Loyola. Above it, the Saint, in silver, raised his height behind a ring of bronze rococo candelabra.

A man in black was kneeling, eyes closed. Lady Diana recognized the Reverend Father Antonio de Salas. She stood motionless behind him, in respect for his prayer.

The Jesuit rose, perceived her, and bowed :

“Lady Wynham, perhaps I should not have brought you to this cold church, but I do not frequent those places to which you are accustomed, and which are so well suited to your beauty.”

The Jesuit invited Lady Diana to sit down beside him. They were almost alone. A few of the faithful knelt before the main altar, lowering their eyes before the splendid *Circumcision* of Maratta.

“Father,” said Lady Diana, “I did not ask for this interview in order to confess. To tell the truth, I have never confessed because I have no faith. I respect the beliefs of my ancestors as much as those of the iconoclasts of the New Hebrides. I beg you to listen to me, not as a confessor ready to wash my sins away in return for an adequate penitence, but as a man of experience whose judgment I respect.”

“Lady Wynham, I am going to listen to you with all the benevolent deference which your confidence merits.”

The friendly attitude, the almost affectionate tone of the Jesuit, came as a great surprise to Lady Diana. Her beautiful eyes contemplated with astonishment the angular face of her companion, who now softened for her the cold severity of his sombre look.

"My words," said Father de Salas, "seem to disconcert you."

"I admit it, particularly after our conversation in Venice."

"The explanation is, Lady Wynham, that I am more resigned. That which then bothered me no longer exists. I know now that in you we have an ally, so, since you feel that you want to confide in me, I will attempt, not to absolve you, but to advise you."

Lady Diana spoke. With the precision of a doctor who has diagnosed his own malady, she revealed, without false shame, her love for Ruzzini. She revealed also, without vain excuses, her adventure with Colonel Warren. Father de Salas, his head bent low on his breast, arms crossed, sitting motionless, listened.

"Now you know, Father, what cruel vengeance Destiny has been holding in store for me. I call it Destiny; you would call it Providence."

"No," the Jesuit protested gently, "Providence never seeks revenge."

"I know, I know! You will assure me that Providence makes us atone for all our sins. That is a euphemism invented by its earthly ambassadors to tame their flocks. But it is small consolation—You now know the entire truth, Father. I love Ruzzini passionately; I belong to him completely. He is a part of me. He is that flame burning within me which makes me live, and which consumes me. For his sake I would like to wipe away the blots on my past. For his sake I would like to illuminate my future life with a new light. Those

fears which you might have foreseen in Venice are non-existent now. Ruzzini and I are now but two pieces of the same flesh. Yet my happiness, born only yesterday, bears with it an invisible stigma. We are going, two lovers united in the most beautiful love imaginable, to confront Colonel Warren. Nevertheless, Ruzzini's enemy once held me in his arms. There is the frightful reality, Father, the reality which wounds me, because the spectre of untruth raises itself before us from the dawn after our first night. That is why I entreat you to tell me: Should I reveal everything to Ruzzini?"

Father de Salas did not answer. Lady Diana became impatient.

"Must I speak, Father? Everything within me incites me never to deceive again, to bare my soul to the man who is dearer to me than life. This secret stifles me. That past mistake weighs terribly on my heart. I feel myself almost regenerated by this love, and my conscience cries out to me to conceal nothing. Frankness has suddenly become in my eyes a priceless jewel, a marvellous diamond which eclipses the brilliance of my diadems and necklaces. Tell me what to do!"

Lady Diana was clasping the Jesuit's coarse black sleeve. Her heart beat furiously. Fever darkened her anxious eyes. She concluded, almost in a whisper:

"The truth, Father, oh, to be able to tell him all the truth!"

Then Father de Salas turned toward her, laid his calm hand on the pretty fingers which clutched his cassock, and answered gently:

"No."

Lady Diana was startled.

"You—Father—you advise me to tell a lie?"

"Lady Wynham, is it a lie to be silent? If a lie is intrinsically a reprehensible fact because it implies the intention of harming; the dissimulation

of a fact, is, on the contrary, not only excusable, but sometimes commendable. All depends upon the intention. Do you want to make your friend unhappy? Do you want to add to the preoccupations which absorb him a blow to sentiment which will haunt him day and night? Why make him suffer to no purpose?"

Father de Salas's words, uttered in a low, controlled voice, had great effect on Lady Diana's mind.

Feebly she protested :

"I do not want to make Ruzzini suffer."

"In that case," the priest interrupted, "I am sure that if you were acting in cold blood, I mean that, were your judgment not now obscured by this devouring passion, you would not even consider making such a mistake. I can tell you, in all honesty, that you are everything to Count Ruzzini, who bared his heart to me the other day. He spoke to me of you in terms which convinced me of the intensity of his passion. I know, therefore, what you risk in destroying his confidence. Perhaps you will say that his hate of Warren would be only augmented, because not long ago he held you in his arms. But what is the use? Why hurt him by raising that spectre before your love when that love is the beautiful consolation of his unquiet life? Ruzzini is the seventh member of his family to bear the name of Angelo; he is, according to the legend, destined to a dramatic end."

Lady Diana shuddered. The Jesuit hastened to reassure her :

"Oh, I beg you, Lady Diana, do not attach any importance to the pagan oracles so dear to fortune-tellers in this country. Neither you nor I are accessible to these deplorable superstitions. When Ruzzini speaks to you of it, he will be the first to laugh at it with you. I wanted simply to give you this advice: Remain the guardian angel of my

friend. And I only hope that your wings may save him from every care, every anxiety, and every anguish of heart. If you can accomplish that, you will have well won the gratitude of those who are secretly aiding him in his mission of justice, and you will have the secret joy of having strewn flowers along the path which he is learning to follow."

Father de Salas's eloquence convinced Lady Diana. She took her leave, after visiting with him the choir of the church, and found herself once more walking along the little street of Sant' Ignazio. She passed the high building of the Collegio Romano and reached her automobile, waiting for her at the piazza Colonna. Her chauffeur hastened to take her to the Trinita del Monte where Ruzzini was to meet her at four o'clock. There Lady Diana was surprised to find a letter in her room :

"Diana darling,

"I am desolated at being unable to wait for you, but I have got to take the first train to Naples. Follow me in your automobile. Leave immediately. You will arrive at eight or nine o'clock in the evening. I shall be waiting for you at the *Restaurant Margharita* of the *Castello dell' Ovo*. I have serious business to attend to there to-night. I will tell you all about it when I see you. Come quickly.

"Hurry, love of my life, these few hours of separation are already preying on my mind. You know why, don't you? I will tell you : It is because the thought of you is in my thoughts like the bird which lies in the nest that shelters him. You are part of me and you are mine, I am yours, your prey, your thing, your property. Take my flesh. Drink my blood to the last drop. To you I offer all my tenderness and all the violence of my passion. To you I dedicate all the thrills, all the hopes and all the follies which one man can live in life. You are my Queen. I am taking with me the little blue handkerchief which you left on the bed, and while I am

writing you I am pressing it like living flesh, breathing your sweet perfume which impregnates it and makes me tremble. Diana, our love is your masterpiece. It crushes me, and it magnifies me. It devastates me, and it inspires me. Where is your skin, Diana darling? Where is that white velvet which I have not caressed for four hours? Bring me quickly your smile and the happy sparkle of your great eyes, and those little hands which I await, which I seek, which I want—your adorable little hands—enchanting balm to the fever which is consuming me.”

Lady Diana was leaning back in the armchair. She re-read the letter and covered it with kisses like a young girl reading her first love letter. The flowing yet virile writing of Ruzzini magnetized her. She felt as though she could hear her lover, standing behind her, whispering passionate words.

She arrived at half-past eight at the Castello dell' Ovo. Her motor had sped along the Roman countryside passing the odd little wagons with blue hoods that bore the wine-growers of Frascati; winding about the little hills capped with dilapidated houses—yellowed cubes seamed with cracks. The halo of Naples in the phantasmagoria of the setting sun had at last appeared with its giant tower of Vesuvius breathing its hot black breath out to sea.

She had passed quarters lined with multi-coloured standards, that resolved with nearness into wet clothing flapping on the lines. She had cut through streets filled with groups of riotous children and skimmed past shop booths buzzing with aggression. Then had come the inextricable confusion of the via Roma, an explosion of exclamations, blows of whips, bumping of cabs, grinding of brakes, and high-pitched voices of vendors of newspapers at the street corners. She

had finally reached the sea—a sea bleeding in the agonizing dusk, with the black silhouettes of boats rolling gently in the warm breeze.

The *Castello dell' Ovo* rose up before her—a mass of rocks dropped by the hand of Polyphemus. The castle with its sad lights on high—poor lights for weary prisoners—and, below, the brilliantly illuminated verandas of the restaurants for optimistic tourists.

Ruzzini was awaiting her on the terrace. He went to meet her. He kissed lingeringly the hollow of the little hand she stretched out to him, and said joyously:

“Darling, you must be hungry. Let us eat first. To-night at eleven o’clock we are going down to the docks.”

Lady Diana asked him happily:

“To dream in the moonlight, my love?”

Ruzzini whispered:

“No, to watch the embarkation of a million cartridges, fifteen thousand guns and three hundred machine-guns.”

Lady Diana trembled. But Ruzzini looked at her so tenderly, and the mute kiss which he offered her at a distance was so persuasive, that she forgot cartridges and rifles to think only of the charming shadows of the Embarkation for Cythera.

Chapter Twelve

"I WANT TO BE HAPPY"

RELAXING in the motor which rolled along the via Caracciolo, between the dusty shrubbery of the Villa Comunale and the sea sparkling in the resplendent midday sun, Lady Diana savoured in silence the joy of clinging to Ruzzini's hand beneath the travelling rug. She was no longer disturbed by the strange happenings of the night just passed—that journey in the evening across the port, along the docks of the eastern harbour; her lover's conference in the captain's cabin on the bridge of the cargo boat while the last of the strangely marked crates were being put on board. She could see herself, still, sitting on a pile of tarry sails, on the edge of the wharf, beside this boat full of shadows, a mysterious craft equipped for a secret destination. She had seen Ruzzini on the gangplank talking with a man in a sailor's blouse and another of marked Levantine characteristics. Then her lover had rejoined her. At about one o'clock in the morning, after the excitement of the departure, when the freighter's red and green lights had disappeared in the darkness, she had walked back on the arm of Ruzzini to the automobile which was waiting beneath the dark walls of the Castell' Nuovo.

A night of ineffable love—words mumbled against lips pressed close—intoxication, superb yet painful, of reviving pleasures, longed for with the qualifying fear of killing them too soon.

With her small bare hand squeezing that of her

lover, Lady Diana closed her eyes. While her eyelids, heavy with memories, guarded visions too beautiful to expose to the brilliancy of the day, Ruzzini, with that marvellous understanding of his beloved, remained in silence for fear of breaking the charm. The automobile rolled on between gardens bordered with lilies, and villas surrounded by dwarf palms.

"Diana," Ruzzini said suddenly, "last night you saw the departure of the ammunition destined to aid the Egyptian revolutionaries in their attempt to gain liberty. The other day I explained to you my motive for personal vengeance against Colonel Warren. The battle is becoming definite and more bitter because, my spies inform me, he has just been appointed Chief of Staff of the British Expeditionary Forces in Egypt. On the 5th of October, Colonel Warren, a Brigadier-general since yesterday, will leave for Malta. He will be on board the cruiser *Cromwell*. He will inspect those battalions already on their way to reinforce the English troops debarked at Alexandria. If nothing deters him, he will leave again about the 8th or 9th on the same warship; that date will be a sad one for us, for we must separate temporarily, Diana. My duty will oblige me to leave Italy and go by an indirect route to Egypt."

Lady Diana's eyes grew large with fear and she exclaimed:

"To Egypt!"

"Yes. My adversary will be there to fight the rebels to whom we are supplying food and munitions. He will win, because we can do practically nothing against Great Britain's strength. But I intend to make him continue to pay dearly for his victory until that day when I meet him face to face, alone. When I have succeeded in separating him from his khaki-clad guards, I will make him expiate his crime as he deserves. I look forward to

my revenge, Diana, with a slow satisfaction. I have had other opportunities since the day he committed the crime, but I have preferred to wait. The *vendetta* is sweet on the tongue when one tastes it cold. Chance has affiliated me with that secret organization of which Sherim Pasha, Doctor Hermus, and Father de Salas are the instigators. They armed the first revolutionaries; with almost unbelievable skill they have managed to smuggle munitions into Egypt. I have become their associate and their adviser, and, thanks to them, have found a battleground where I shall have, first, the secret pleasure of dealing mysterious blows at my enemy, and, later, of killing him as justice demands."

Lady Diana listened to Ruzzini, stupefied. She exclaimed :

"But it is the purest folly. You know what you risk in approaching Warren—a state of siege in Egypt—martial law."

"I shall play my cards, Diana. Risks like this never deterred my ancestors in the day when Lombardy was as yet unflooded with Cook's caravans. Besides, who knows, perhaps you will help me? Oh, I mean without compromising yourself; that I could never allow. I mean that you might help me secretly. You, who will be *persona grata* in Cairo, could doubtless be my secret accomplice. But we shall speak later of these serious things; now let us think only of the happiness which fills us in this beneficent sunlight, and let us lunch at Baja to seal before the sea the solemn pact which our love exacts."

The little restaurant was empty. Every table was adorned with a bottle of Chianti that looked like a dancer of frozen green glass in her crinoline of wicker. There were flowers in the vases, there was innocence in the whiteness of the tablecloths and tenderness in the air.

Lady Diana and Ruzzini, seated opposite each other, scarcely ate. Beyond the wooden balcony they could see on the right the little port of Baja with a few small boats with naked masts. Opposite, was the blue sea, virginal, painted with the blue of Murillo, a calm and peaceful sea where it seemed as though nothing but purity, uprightness and delicacy could be reflected.

Ruzzini laid his hand in a lingering caress on the bare arm stretched along the table. They played with their passion like two young tigers buffeting each other about with drawn-in claws. They amused themselves in the labyrinth of Desire, forgetting that Destiny, the Minotaur, hidden in the shadows, was covertly watching them.

"Dearest," said Lady Diana, "I will help you with every ounce of strength I have, for you are my only reason for living. Your love has exalted me. Ask everything of me; I will give you more than everything. My will is subject to you. I, so proud, I, who until now have always kept my mind beyond the influence of any man, I now give it to you fearlessly. It is the most beautiful present that I can make you; I offer you the best I have."

The marvellous blue eyes of Lady Diana were clouded with tears. Two great drops like lustrous pearls trembled on her lashes and irradiated her look of intense happiness. The masterful expression of Ruzzini's face softened before so touching a sight. He felt a sudden thrill, abruptly clasped her wrist, and answered in a voice almost harsh with emotion:

"Diana, if my love has made another woman of you, let yours guide me in that night where I must plunge myself. The shepherd lost in the country follows the direction of the evening star. I shall advance by the signal of your love; you will protect me. I want always to feel your presence in the days of danger. Your look will envelop me then

as in this unforgettable moment, in this tiny port on the Neapolitan coast, when I know that we are in perfect communion. Swear to me solemnly, Diana, that so long as my *vendetta* lasts you will not leave me without the mystic help of your faithful thoughts for a single day, a single hour. I have taken you for mine, and I guard you jealously. I neither can nor will lose you. Swear to me also, as I swear to you, that if misfortune ever separates us, no other person shall ever possess us."

Lady Diana's look was a silent vow. Everything that love can mean was there in the transparent blue of her misty eyes. When Ruzzini saw the two great pearls run down the cheeks of his mistress, and her lids close under the violence of her emotion, he dug his nails into the little hand which lay in his and, with a dry throat and beating heart, he turned his head toward the sea.

The sea slept under the sun. Two small brown boats with very white sails seemed also to sleep on the cerulean mirror. One might have compared them to two birds of prey with drooping wings forgetting the fatigue of their troubled flight.

Ruzzini said nothing; his soul was invaded with a boundless melancholy. He also, a bird of prey, drawn by the tempest, was resting his tired heart in the soothing quiet of felicity. It was like a marvellous bath in milk and roses, which relaxed his muscles and calmed his relentless will. He would have liked to have time come to a sudden stop, so that he could dream longer in this glorious torpor.

Suddenly the phonograph in a nearby villa began nasally to play: *I Want To Be Happy*. The monotonous rhythm of this melody recalled the cut-and-dried distractions of the cabarets of the great capitals, where, every night, acquaintances of an hour live their lives between night and morning. It was, in this marvellous setting in the Bay

of Naples, an insult by men to Nature—to Nature, which despises them and taunts them and laughs at their weaknesses. But neither Lady Diana nor Ruzzini were inclined, on that day, to let their sensations pass into the realm of scepticism. They were lovers. They listened, trembling, to that cheap music which softly cradled their tête-à-tête and deadened for the time being the gnawing of anxiety. Their clasped hands pressed more tightly together. The refrain began again : *I want to be happy*——. It caressed them like swan's-down and circled—a negligible refrain—about their ears.

"Some day we shall know the serenity of unmitigated happiness," Lady Diana said with lowered eyes.

"Diana, on the day when our happiness is unmitigated, it will no longer be happiness," Ruzzini said, his gaze on the smooth blue sea. "When one elects to love passionately, one chooses a path where the rough and the smooth alternate. Fear and anxiety lurk behind each tree. I love you, and so I suffer."

He was silent. His hand continued to stroke the adored hand. His eyes continued to caress from a distance the softness of the skin. He went on :

"Diana, until now, you and I have known only the smooth parts of our road. May God help us in the future! Don't laugh, Diana—I am a Catholic and a Venetian. I don't practice my religion, but——" he hesitated, then added : "Suppose we said a tiny prayer?"

Blushing, Lady Diana murmured :

"I no longer know how to pray, but with you, through you, I shall revive my former beliefs and the charming dreams of my happy childhood. With you I shall pray with all the fervour of my heart."

They were silent for a few minutes. What prayer passed their motionless lips! What mute

hymn of love rose from their united souls to lose itself in the Beyond—in that celestial promenade where nameless desires and lost tendernesses wander for ever!

So they prayed, and from the neighbouring villa there came the jazz rhythm, repeated to satiety:
I want to be happy!

* * * * *

The sapphire of the night is framed at the open window by curtains of cream-coloured silk. The room in the palace, with its soft lights, has become a chapel of anæsthetized desires. Ruzzini and Lady Diana are exhausted in the middle of the disordered couch.

Lady Diana and Ruzzini have just lived hours. Their happiness is intensified by regret at its having come so late into being. There is, for both of them, the bitter-sweet happiness of having learned through others to love too well.

A falsetto voice coming, in the late night, from the Partenopeo quay died away in the darkness, accompanied by the high notes of a mandolin. Lady Diana and Ruzzini no longer heard the voice. Their closed eyes saw nothing. Night had lowered on their Nirvana its star-spangled curtain of blue.

Chapter Thirteen

FEMININE COMPLICITY

RUZZINI had been gone since eleven o'clock. He had had business to attend to at the port. Lady Diana, sitting near the window of the palace, admired, while she polished her nails, the imposing mass of the *Castello dell' Ovo*. For a week she had experienced unbroken happiness in Naples. Ruzzini was awaiting the arrival of Doctor Hermus, Sherim Pasha, and Father de Salas. It was the period of calm that precedes the storm.

There was a knock at the door. A bellboy in a white jacket came in with a card on a silver tray. Lady Diana had scarcely time to read the name before the visitor had rushed into the room.

"Jimmy!"

"Yes, here I am."

The young American took the bellboy by the shoulders and literally threw him out of the room. He closed the door, tossed his felt hat on an arm-chair and confronted Lady Diana, feet far apart, hands on his hips. He repeated solemnly:

"Yes, here I am."

Lady Diana raised her head, glanced sideways at the young man, continued composedly to polish her nails and replied nonchalantly:

"I see that you are still so ill-bred that you force your way into my room without my permission."

Jimmy had evidently discounted the fact that his appearance might annoy his friend. He was now far more disconcerted than she, and stammered:

"Well!—I am—I am——"

He seemed to be unable to say just what he was. Lady Diana helped him out :

"I will tell you what you are, my young friend. You are a little nobody who thinks he can do anything he pleases because he has millions, and who thinks he can buy souls the way one rents a place on the Grand Canal. A gesture of protection, a wink of the left eye, a half-open cheque book—and the bird is tamed. It seems easy, doesn't it? Stupid little fool, imported from the United States like corned beef and pragmatism. You are all fools, every one of you—bald-headed beaux or young snobs, you all think money will buy what is not to be bought. I have met you every day at the hotels and the fashionable resorts—you and your grey-haired compatriots. I have seen you with pretty women whom you have hung with pearls and smothered with precious furs. I have seen all of you parading yourselves beside beautiful women who smiled at you so as not to bite you, and fell back on powdering themselves unnecessarily to keep their hands from striking you. You want them, of course; very likely you even love them. But you haven't the sense, you haven't the intuition, to see that you are merely the ball which chains them to the galley of compulsory pleasure. So much the better if you happen to pick out a silly little blonde doll who says 'papa' and 'mama' to the point of childishness. She won't suffer. So much the worse if your victim is a sensitive and delicate woman, if she has a heart and a brain. She will cry without your knowing it on the orchids you bestow upon her and will stretch out desperate hands toward a very poor, very small and very humble bunch of violets. But all that is beyond your comprehension, Mr. Jimmy, little King of Celluloid. What I say is too serious and too candid for your baseball player's brain.

You never learned to consider these problems on the campus of Mens Putrida. But I should not blame you for it. A man must understand women to make himself loved by real women—not those frantic creatures who gambol between two bed-hangings—and that understanding you will never attain. . . . But enough of this kind of conversation. Let us assume that I have been discussing the price of cotton on Wall Street or the newest record for the hundred-yard dash, and tell me to what I owe the honour of this unexpected visit.”

Lady Diana had completely done away with Jimmy's usual self-assurance. He brought his feet together; his hands dropped from his hips, and hung awkwardly by his sides. He fussed about, unable to express himself. Words of protest rose to his lips, but he did not dare to utter them. He wanted to excuse himself and, at the same time, to fly into a rage, to object and to apologize.

“Well—well—Diana, I—oh, damn it——! You lecture me when I came to—— Now look here, Diana, this is not fair—I find you at this hotel in Naples after three weeks' search—I put three detectives on your trail.”

“*What* did you dare to do? Put detectives on my trail?”

“Forgive me, Diana, please forgive me. I couldn't live alone any longer in that deserted palace with Othello, who actually did succeed in consummating a morganatic marriage with Countess Orseolo's cat.”

Lady Diana could not repress a laugh:

“No, Jimmy, you don't mean to tell me that your monkey actually succeeded in——?”

“Yes, Diana, and at midday on the balcony of the Rezzonico Palace. Forty gondolas stopped in front of the palace and ten kodaks snapped this unusual ceremony. The Countess sent me a legal

document, and the Director of the Zoological Gardens in Antwerp wired me to reserve the first-born. No, seriously, Diana, I was too lonely there. Venice in September was more than I could stand. The *Danieli* bar is full of couples eating sandwiches and gazing into each other's eyes. The lagoon is covered with honeymoon couples, and everywhere one goes people seem to be making love. At this time, the Queen of the Adriatic is like an old belle running a house of ill-repute. My loneliness made me desperate. I did not hear a word from you, so finally I employed three detectives to find you. One explored the Lake district and came back sputtering. Another went to Sicily and came back with a sun-stroke; the third rummaged all through Rome, and that is how I found out that you had left for Naples.

"Oh, Diana, you don't realize what a rotten time I was having! What I really wanted to know was whether you had gone alone, prompted by an attack of nerves, or——"

Jimmy stopped.

"Or what?" asked Lady Diana.

"Or whether there was another man in the case."

"Do you think that I would do a thing like that?"

"I beg your pardon, Diana, I'm in a complete fog. Of course I'm off the track altogether, but I got it into my head that Ruzzini, perhaps, wanted to take you away from me."

"And what did your detective say?"

"That you had been living alone for a month in that little apartment near the Borghese Gardens."

"So?"

"So I'm a damned fool."

"Socrates said: 'Know thyself.' You remember, Jimmy?"

"That general was right."

"Socrates—a general?"

"Wasn't he the old bird who commanded the Retreat of the Ten Thousand?"

"Let it go, Jimmy; Greek history evidently can't enter the United States duty-free. And furthermore, we are getting away from the point. You wanted to find me: you have run me to earth. You were afraid of finding me in the arms of a man. You were wrong. What more do you want?"

"You."

"Is that all?"

"Diana, don't be cruel or sarcastic. I understand perfectly well that I lack the superior mind that pleases a woman of fine sensibilities like yourself. I split neither hairs nor dollars into quarters. But I'm a good fellow, Diana, you know that."

"Publicity."

"No, I mean I'm not a bad sort after all, and if you really had a little affair on hand—temporarily—I would close my eyes, provided my rival were neither better-looking nor more intelligent than I."

"Don't worry, Jimmy, it would be difficult for me to deceive you with a man more stupid than yourself."

"I don't quite understand. Just what do you mean by that?"

"Men always ask questions, and women always invent replies—when all is said and done, no one knows more at the finish than at the start. Now, Jimmy, do as I say: Go back to the Rezzonico Palace, go back and drink gin-fizzes at the Excelsior. In six weeks or six months or six years, you may see me again."

"Oh, but I hate indecision, Diana. I get that from my mother. She always collected, numbered and classified my father's love letters in a notebook. Tell me exactly when you will return to Venice."

"Never."

Jimmy burst out laughing. He found the joke very amusing, and repeated :

"Never? Never?"

Lady Diana nodded. Jimmy picked up his hat and gloves, patted his ex-mistress affectionately on the shoulder and said through his nose :

"Say, Diana, I shall expect you Saturday morning—the *Triton* will be waiting for you at the quay of the railroad station. Remember now, that's settled. Next Saturday. Bye-bye, old thing."

He plastered a noisy kiss on the back of Diana's neck and walked to the door whistling. With his hand on the knob, he turned and said :

"Diana, if I ever meet the man you are crazy about, I won't tell him a word about chasing you to Naples. Give you my word!"

He disappeared. Lady Diana had remained seated by the window, had not even turned around. The polisher still on her nails, she contemplated again the *Castello dell' Ovo*. She had already forgotten Jimmy's visit as one forgets a bee that flies into the room, buzzes a few times against the panes, finds a way out and flies away.

* * * * *

Lady Diana and Ruzzini had returned about seven o'clock after a long drive in the sun of Naples, through the dusty shrubbery of Margherita Park beside the Castle of St. Elmo.

Standing together in the window, they were watching Vesuvius by the light of the setting sun—Vesuvius, that Chinese hat adorned with an ostrich plume of black and white smoke. The Neapolitans were strolling on the asphalt of the *Partenopeo*. The breakwater of San Vincenzo buried its long stone needle in the sea. Realization of their perfect union rendered them silent on this night as they looked out over the bay of Naples, blazing with vermillion powdered with gold.

The ringing of the telephone tore them from their

twilight reverie. Its shrill jangle startled Lady Diana, recalling her rudely, coldly, inexorably, to reality.

Ruzzini answered :

" *Pronto*. Yes, who wants to speak to me? "

The porter replied :

" A lady, sir, she wants to see you immediately. "

" I am not in the habit of receiving people whom I do not know. What is her name? "

Ruzzini was looking at Lady Diana, who was much intrigued. She saw that he had regained his cold expression. The fighter had replaced the lover. She asked him in a low voice :

" A woman wants to see you? "

" Without giving her name. I don't like these mysteries. As matters stand, I am obliged to be very careful. "

" But perhaps her visit has nothing to do with the work you have at hand. Probably she has come for sentimental reasons. "

Ruzzini made an impatient gesture of protest. There was a knock at the door. The white-clad bellboy handed him an envelope. Ruzzini read the contents and ordered curtly :

" Tell the lady to come up. " Then, turning toward Lady Diana, he added :

" Darling, permit me to receive her, first, alone in this *salon*. I will tell you afterward who she is. "

Lady Diana hesitated on the threshold. Ruzzini took her roughly in his arms, crushed her lips against his, and murmured :

" Already? Already you mistrust me? "

But Lady Diana disengaged herself, smiling, and answered :

" No, I could never doubt you, " and disappeared.

The door opened. Countess Nicoletta Ruzzini entered, her arms held out to her brother, who embraced her without a word.

Nicoletta Ruzzini, at twenty-one, had all the grace of a very young girl, and the serious aspect of a woman crushed too soon by life. Delicate, small, with dark hair and a classic profile, she was a fitting idealization of the beauty of the Ruzzini family.

When she had withdrawn from her brother's embrace, she reproached him sweetly :

"One must pass an examination in order to see you?"

"No, little sister——"

"You are not living alone here, then? Ah, now I know, I should have guessed it before. Lady Diana Wynham?"

And with a look of genuine pain, she protested :

"Oh, Angelo—an Englishwoman?"

"Please be still, dear little girl, you are speaking of the finest of women. A loyal heart and the most upright spirit."

Nicoletta repeated, incredulously :

"An *Englishwoman*?"

"You shall see her in a few minutes; and then you can tell me whether my confidence is misplaced. But I want to know why you have come to see me. What has happened, little sister?"

"I have a letter for you from Father de Salas. Here it is."

Ruzzini opened the letter and read :

"My dear Angelo :

"I prefer to confide to your sister rather than to the Royal Postal Service the information which we received yesterday. The destroyer *Arrow* has seized the cargo of the freighter *Regina Elena* near the African coast. You will know what that means. Furthermore, we are informed from Malta that, contrary to the information given out, the arrival of the Staff of the British Expeditionary Forces is imminent. A.Z. has sent to our agent in Messina, by the owner of a fishing vessel, the

exact details concerning new supplies destined for Egypt. It is most important that we meet at nine o'clock to-morrow evening at Dr. Hermus's house. Be there without fail. We shall make such definite decisions as the situation requires.

"Yours,

"ANTONIO DE SALAS."

Ruzzini put the letter in his pocket.

"Nicoletta, the war is about to start. So much the better. You will be avenged."

But the Countess Ruzzini moved away. She murmured :

"Angelo, I have given you the Reverend Father's letter. Since you are not alone, there is nothing more for me to do here."

"Please be quiet, jealous little sister!"

"No, I'll not. I would never reproach you for loving a woman—but *that* woman!"

"You don't know her. You have no right to judge her until you do. I shall introduce you."

"No, no, Angelo! I refuse."

Ruzzini had taken the fleeing Nicoletta in his arms and called :

"Diana, come quickly—come and meet a little savage who hates you furiously. Please hurry!"

The door opened. Lady Diana appeared. Nicoletta, her brows frowning over her great dark eyes, turned away so as not to see the astonished Scotch-woman.

"Ruzzini, would you mind leaving me alone with your sister?" Lady Diana asked very gently.

In some miraculous fashion, her voice had calmed Nicoletta's spirit of revolt. The Venetian looked at Lady Diana. She no longer showed a desire to run away. Ruzzini hesitated. Lady Diana, holding out her hand to Nicoletta, went on :

"You can see for yourself that your sister already hates me less—please let us talk together."

Ruzzini went out.

Half an hour later, when he opened the door of the *salon*, his sister was weeping happily in the arms of Lady Diana, who with a tender gesture, caressed the young girl's forehead.

"Already friends!" Ruzzini exclaimed happily.

Nicoletta abruptly hugged Lady Diana and cried out savagely :

"Angelo, say, rather, allies in the face of a common enemy."

The two women exchanged a look, and in that look there was the strange comprehension and mute eloquence which characterizes feminine complicity.

Chapter Fourteen

LADY DIANA ENTERS THE PLOT

DOCTOR HERMUS was a strange individual. On his little finger he wore a ring with a prince's coronet cut in a lapis lazuli ground, and, in his necktie, a gold pin in the form of a small lady-bird.

Doctor Hermus, born Prinz zu Winterstein-Meissen, a Saxon gentleman, disciple of Machiavelli, had been all over the world strewing on the registers of the big hotels and on illegal passports the remarkable total of his pseudonyms. In the same way that many women have a passion for pearls or other precious stones, Doctor Hermus had an uncontrollable passion for everything connected with contraband goods, underhand transactions and espionage. The Secret Service Bureaus of Great Britain, France, Italy, Switzerland and Russia all had notes about Doctor Hermus, and each one under a different name. Polyglot and omniscient, in turn, a man of the world or a proletarian, a prince or a business man, a dandy with a monocle or an intellectual with spectacles, he had been known for ten years in every latitude and longitude and in every country stricken by the Red fever. His resources appeared inexhaustible. Possessor of a large fortune, converted into dollars and florins before the fall of the mark, he backed the most extraordinary enterprises and amused himself by speculating in the least reputable business ventures. He had made several millions through his participation in the clandestine fitting-out of Abd-el-Krim in Morocco, and for

three years had been engaged in organizing a fleet of high-powered motor boats to supply the citizens of the United States with the forbidden nectars and champagnes shunned by the prohibitionists.

Encouraged by his success in the Riff, he had conceived the vast project of secretly arming all the malcontents of Islam, and had interested in his plan Sherim Pasha and certain representatives of the Company of Jesus. This extraordinary man, this demiurge of Chance, had managed to ally the Cross and the Crescent in an enterprise of undoubted danger, but full of promise and rich in future dividends.

* * * * *

The little villa near Pausilippe, where Doctor Hermus had chosen to live, was a white masonry cube crowned by a sort of hexagonal minaret with blue and yellow windows. The garden, sloping abruptly to the sea, was planted with tamarinds, aloes and acacias.

At exactly nine o'clock, Ruzzini reached the garden gate and rang the bell. A herculean valet, with a flat head—a former instructor of gymnastics to the White Cuirassiers in Potsdam—ushered him into a small room in doubtful Oriental style. The Reverend Father de Salas, Sherim Pasha and Doctor Hermus were talking, seated around a table in the middle of which stood a roulette wheel strewn with multi-coloured chips.

The three men stood up to greet Ruzzini, who exclaimed ironically :

“Did you bring me here this evening to break the bank? Have you, my dear Doctor, discovered the infallible system which laughs at bad luck and conjures up the most remarkable sequences?”

Doctor Hermus winked in answer :

“No, Ruzzini, but I have found out that our

goings and comings seem to be interesting to certain people."

The conference began. Sherim Pasha and the Reverend Father de Salas advanced their objections to Doctor Hermus's project. The latter in his turn spoke :

"You already know, gentlemen, the major outlines of my plan. Islam is becoming active to an extent that worries the European ministries. My secret agents of the *Komintern* have informed me from Moscow, via Stockholm and Rotterdam, that the budget for propaganda against the Mussulman has more than doubled in the past month.

"We have recently sent to Morocco, Algiers and Tunis, about a dozen agitators, chosen from among the most fanatical believers in the Koran. Thanks to the extraordinary kindness of the French authorities, who seem to have taken for a watchword : 'No trouble with the Third Internationale,' these men have been able to penetrate French Africa and begin their subterranean work. One of them is an emir without any subjects, who must have descended from Mohammed through a line of worthless women ; another is a brigand chief from Medina, thrown out of the Hedjaz because of assassinations, murders, armed hold-ups and other little peculiarities of the same type ; the third is a cadi of Tripoli of persuasive words and embryonic scruples.

"The others are of the same type. Whatever they are doing is to our great interest at the moment, since the logical consequence is the encouragement of the Egyptian revolutionaries in their struggle against English occupation, the enlistment of new recruits, and, consequently, more customers for us. The more these men excite Mohammedan fanaticism, the more rifles and machine guns we shall sell. Nothing else interests us."

Doctor Hermus stopped talking and tapped the

Reverend Father de Salas on the shoulder, adding in a sarcastic tone :

“Is it not so, Father?”

When the Jesuit failed to reply, he continued :

“Come, come, do not sulk at the great profits that are coming our way. I quite understand that your Society is distrustful; you have never forgotten the Lavalette bankruptcy in the eighteenth century. Just the same, you have not unlearned the art of clever trading. When one has armed clippers for Brazil and acquired gold mines in California, when one has owned real estate in San Francisco, and financed the transportation of emigrants, one need not hesitate to underwrite a little deal in contraband arms. I know what’s the trouble with you, though—you are afraid that you will be found out some day? Don’t worry! The intermediaries between your associates and myself are discreet—that’s what they’re paid for. That guarantees honour and morals. The prosperity of the Society of Jesus is certainly worth the bones of a few Presbyterian or Anglican Tommies on the banks of the Nile—what the hell!”

Ruzzini had made a discreet sign to Doctor Hermus, who concluded :

“Forgive me, Father. I was only joking. Ha, ha! Now, let’s talk more seriously. If, in one sense of the word, we have good news—in regard to the Mussulman revolution—we must not forget that the news concerning the English is less satisfactory. Consider the reaction in London. Our customers want to attack the British reinforcements sent to Alexandria. If only our spy service in Egypt functioned the way it does on the Continent, I could be certain of putting more than one cog in the wheels of Albion’s chariot, as she rides by, helmeted in steel and armoured in hypocrisy; but, damn it all! my informers are, unfortunately, not well-placed.

"To know the exact situation, we need someone in direct touch with the British Staff. If we had time, I could certainly find someone, for money works on principles the way water works on salt—it melts each sooner or later. Unfortunately, we have very little time, and I cannot go to Egypt to find an ally at the risk of being arrested."

Ruzzini had risen. He picked up his hat and said to Doctor Hermus :

"Wait a quarter of an hour and I will bring to you here the accomplice you are looking for."

"You are joking, Ruzzini!"

"I need a quarter of an hour, no more."

Ruzzini disappeared. Doctor Hermus, incredulous, looked at Sherim Pasha, who shook his head doubtfully. The Saxon finally addressed Father de Salas :

"Ruzzini likes to mystify us. Do you really believe, Father, that he has found the man we are looking for?"

The Jesuit raised his hand sententiously and replied calmly :

"The man, no—the woman, perhaps."

* * * * *

Lady Diana entered the drawing-room. Ruzzini followed her with his hat in his hand. He observed the astonishment of Doctor Hermus, who, abruptly risen from behind his table, regarded attentively the beauty in the ermine wrap. Sherim Pasha concealed no more successfully his surprise mixed with anxiety. The Reverend Father de Salas, alone knowing the situation, smiled discreetly.

"Gentlemen," said Ruzzini, "I shall present you to Lady Diana Wynham."

Doctor Hermus clicked his heels together and bowed. Sherim Pasha inclined gracefully. Lady Diana sat down near the Jesuit father, in a chair

which Ruzzini offered her. She took a monogrammed cigarette from a case studded with diamonds and, turning toward the Saxon, she asked :

"You do not mind if I smoke, Doctor Hermus?"

"Not at all, Lady Wynham."

Ruzzini seemed to find diversion in the disconcerted condition of Doctor Hermus. He was the first to speak :

"My dear chap, you look like a shepherd who has suddenly seen a starving wolf plunge into the midst of his flock. However, I hasten to say that the comparison is inexact for, as the Pasha, Antonio de Salas and I are no sheep, so much the less is Lady Diana a wolf come to devour us. Hermus, I promised you an ally : here she is."

The Saxon Prince forced a smile, but it was an incredulous smile. He said with a deference slightly exaggerated :

"Lady Wynham, do not misunderstand my attitude. I do not doubt for a second that Ruzzini has the best reasons in the world for bringing a woman of your rank and above all, of your nationality, into our midst, but—but——"

The Venetian finished :

"But Doctor Hermus has no confidence in you, my dear friend. That shows in his words as well as in his air of embarrassment." Turning toward the Prince, Ruzzini added : "Be reassured. Strange though the situation appears to you, we have, all four of us, an ally in Lady Diana Wynham. She already knows that in two weeks I shall be in Egypt harassing the British forces. Consequently, Lady Wynham holds my life in her hands."

Ruzzini's declaration completely discountenanced Doctor Hermus and Sherim Pasha. They stared at their associate as an audience looks at an audacious tight-rope walker about to cross an abyss on a steel cable. They knew that Ruzzini, a clever psycholo-

gist, was not a man who would compromise himself with a dangerous woman; but that he had chosen for a confidante in his most secret plots a woman who was a compatriot of his adversaries—that passed the limits of reason, that was beyond the bounds of common sense.

Ruzzini was annoyed by the attitude of his two friends. He rapped the table sharply, and concluded impatiently:

“Gentlemen, your financial enterprise runs no more risks in the hands of Lady Wynham than does my own life. I call my friend, Antonio de Salas, as witness.”

The Jesuit agreed:

“I have already given all my confidence to Lady Wynham. And I am ready to do the same thing under any and all circumstances.”

Doctor Hermus bowed again to Lady Diana, and remarked:

“Lady Wynham, the assurances of my friends have conquered my lingering doubts. May I ask you, then, how you would be able to serve Ruzzini’s cause, which is ours as well?”

Lady Diana had been secretly amused at the play of expressions on Doctor Hermus’s face. She extinguished her cigarette in the copper bowl, and, with a sarcastic smile animating the curve of her exquisite mouth, she replied:

“How can I serve your cause? That is very simple—by going to Egypt.”

Sherim Pasha gently submitted an objection:

“The landing of tourists will be suspended because of the blockade on the Mediterranean. Do you think you can obtain a special passport in London? I doubt whether your War Office would consent to——”

“I shall not apply to the Ministry—that would take too long—time is passing. Have you any quick way of getting me to Malta?”

"Certainly, if you're not afraid of going on a fishing boat which would leave Syracuse and drop you at Valette in six hours. But do you mind telling us, Lady Wynham, why you want to go there?"

"To obtain all the necessary authorizations signed by the Chief of the Expeditionary Forces."

"You believe that——?"

"I'm sure of it."

Doctor Hermus and Sherim Pasha seemed to be completely satisfied. The Reverend Father de Salas said nothing. Lady Wynham's confession in the dusk of the church of Gesu weighed heavily on his shoulders. Ruzzini was the only one who trembled when she spoke. Lady Diana's decision was quite unforeseen. He sensed an indefinable trouble and gazed at her. His eyes expressed his astonishment; he felt he must talk with her alone, at once.

"I think there is nothing more to say. Doctor Hermus will arrange for your voyage, dear friend, and I am sure that with your diplomacy you will get the necessary permits."

"I expect to."

Lady Diana took leave of her hosts and went out with Ruzzini. Her chauffeur was waiting five hundred yards from the gate. They went along the parapet of the road, past houses and gardens stretching down the slope. The night was fresh and clear, and they strolled slowly. Suddenly, Ruzzini demanded abruptly:

"From whom are you going to request that safe-conduct?"

Lady Diana replied gently:

"From Colonel Burrough, who is the Assistant Chief-of-Staff. I met him once in London. Don't you think it the best plan? He will be in Malta on the eighth of October. We had better take advantage of it."

"Of course."

Ruzzini took a few steps more and suddenly stopped :

"It is really from Colonel Burrough that you are asking this favour?"

The metallic tone of his beloved voice resounded in Diana's heart.

"Yes. He is a relation of my late husband's. He will not refuse me his signature."

Lady Diana was so frank that Ruzzini seemed convinced. Her little white hand caressed his firm wrist and her lithe body drew near, enchanting in the ermine cloak.

Lady Diana murmured :

"Jealous!"

Ruzzini made a gesture of impatience.

"Darling——! It's the only quick way of getting to Egypt; and that I want to do at any price to help you. You understand. I will do anything to help you down there."

Ruzzini seized her in his arms and begged her :

"No, no. Don't say that—I solemnly forbid you—you understand? Help me—yes; but not at the price of a woman's honour; never that!"

"Great fool! Is my honour at stake because I ask for a complimentary visa?"

"Be careful!"

"Darling, you are losing your mind. Let your friend, Doctor Hermus, arrange a rapid passage to Malta, and, in two weeks, I shall be installed in the midst of your enemies. There, perhaps, I shall run a few risks because of you, but not the sort of risks of which you speak. Don't be so downcast, I shall be all right—I am brave as well as you—almost as brave as you, in fact. Kiss me quickly, my love; take me into your arms under this cypress with its crest swaying in the evening breeze."

Lady Diana's lips offered themselves to his. Her head, thrown back, was surrounded with white fur

—a pink rosebud on a sherbet of perfumed snow. Ruzzini's arms folded about her. The ermine coat was crushed against his chest. The long kiss appeased his fears. He drank from the mouth he loved the philtre of intoxication, that draught with golden wings that ceaselessly revolves in the heaven of lovers.

Chapter Fifteen

A BRITISH WARSHIP

THE Officers' Mess on board H.M.S. *Cromwell*. Whiskey and soda. A few cigarettes are burning themselves out in the copper trays; calm conversation circulates around the deep pile of the dull red table-cover. The Vice-admiral, Sir Bradley Waterbutt, K.C.M.G., is talking in a low voice with Colonel Watts, chief of British Aviation in Egypt, while the Commander of the *Cromwell* discusses the ricochets of a twelve-inch shell on an armoured cruiser with the Deputy Director of the Medical Service and the Assistant Provost Marshal. Under the copper-rimmed starboard port-hole, General Leslie Warren sits chatting lightly with two young artillery officers. He jokes with the cold severity of a Thibetan executioner, who cuts the live flesh with an emery-sharpened *handjar*. Leslie Warren is iron-grey in appearance, with hair white at the temples, and a small moustache the colour of pumice stone. His kisses would be harsh. His retorts are barbed darts. He launches them with implacable dexterity. They freeze the flesh of his interlocutor. But they do not draw blood.

The *Cromwell* is anchored in the port of Valette, before the fort of Sant' Angelo at the entrance of the Bay of Calcara. The lights of the battleships sparkle in the calm night.

There is a knock at the door. The *maitre d'hôtel* of the flagship enters and proffers an envelope to General Leslie Warren, who, with a brief gesture, indicates the Adjutant:

"Dispatches go to Colonel Burrough."

But the steward insists :

"Excuse me, General. It is an urgent and personal message."

Leslie Warren scrutinizes the long white envelope; the elegance of the superscription attracts his attention—a woman's writing in place of the sacramental formula: "On His Majesty's Service." What a surprise at nine o'clock in the evening, at Malta, on board a twenty-three-thousand-ton armoured cruiser! The signature surprises him even more. He conceals his astonishment and reads these lines :

"My dear Leslie :

"Do you remember when we took tea together at the *Cercle Interallié* in Paris, some time ago? Do you remember a conversation which was to philanthropy what paprika is to whipped cream? Do you remember a dinner when we smashed the conventions between two salted almonds? If you have not forgotten those naughty memories, do me the favour of receiving me this evening, when and where you can. I will not disturb even a gun turret or a blockhouse perfumed with gun-cotton.

"Please send your answer to the captain of the boat which brought me to the ladder of the *Cromwell*, where I am under the surveillance of anxious and suspicious sailors.

"Sincerely yours,

"DIANA WYNHAM."

Leslie Warren rises. He excuses himself briefly and goes out, followed by the steward. He hurries toward the gangway. The sailor on guard salutes and explains :

"Sir, a fishing boat has arrived from the quay with a lady on board. I could not let her come aboard."

But Leslie Warren hails the Maltese who brings his boat close with a few strokes of the oars.

Lady Diana has recognized the General. She arises, seizes his outstretched hand, jumps lithely to the damp platform and climbs the wooden staircase. Leslie Warren kisses her hand, and, smiling, remarks :

"You know how to make theatrical entrances, my dear. I'll be damned if I expected the pleasure of a visit from you to-night on board the *Cromwell*."

"With me, you never know—but don't you think the wind is a little cool here on the deck, General?"

"I was just about to take you down to my cabin. Follow me, Diana. Unfortunately, His Majesty's vessels are not as brightly lighted as the floating palaces of the Atlantic. Come in, sit down in that armchair. Take a cigarette and tell me to what fortunate chance I owe the pleasure of receiving you on a moonless night in the middle of the Mediterranean."

Lady Diana is seated opposite Leslie Warren, whose grey eyes scrutinize her. What is there in the look of this man? Just what does his affability portend? Two people amused themselves one evening under the glow of four small pink shades. The adventure had had no sequel. No one was left wounded on the field, but is one of the two just possibly hiding a scar? While great misfortunes kill, slight happinesses sometimes irritate. Who could affirm that the cold man of the world had not deeply resented the arrow with which Lady Diana had pierced his male pride? Has he forgotten that phrase : "This little volume to expiate your ignorance of last evening"? Has the gallant of an evening forgotten that his failings as a lover had once inspired his companion to a cruel sally of wit?

Lady Diana tries to find in those grey eyes fixed upon her a hint of badly concealed resentment. General Warren seeks to fathom, in the eyes that examine him, the motive of so unexpected a visit. Two yards only separate these two bodies that had once been in intimate contact—and these two yards are an abyss.

“It is a great pleasure, my dear Warren, to find you at Malta, between two embarkations of troops.”

“And it is an unexpected joy for me, my dear Diana, to receive you here between two fifteen-inch cannon.”

A space of time. The porthole, that round eye of the cabin, with its pupil dotted with stars, seems to look at these two opponents who are sounding each other. It is the first contact of the duellists beneath the ventilator whirling in the ceiling.

Leslie Warren hazards some guesses. Has she come to ask a favour, or through mere unhealthy curiosity? Does she expect from me aid or complicity? He is suspicious with a sort of satisfaction, and he prepares coolly to play with the fire. The memory of his all-too-short experience occupies his thoughts. The connoisseur would like to close his eyes to relive those unforgotten memories. An old tom-cat, sitting in the corner of a chair, loves to think of all the mice he used to crack in his teeth between sunset and dawn.

Lady Diana goes on, in her clear warm voice :

“You may well be astonished, Warren, to find me on this island, at this hour, when it would be more natural for me to be dressing for a ball at some Italian resort. To tell the truth, I came to find you to ask you to do me a little service. Oh, don’t expect to hear me make some exorbitant request that will upset your conscience.”

“My conscience, my dear friend, in your hands

would quickly assume the elasticity of chewing-gum."

"That is what you say, Leslie, and if I merely expressed the desire to take you to Paris with me, would you refuse?"

"Diana! You forget that I am on active duty, and that in a few days I will be directing the operation of the British troops in Egypt."

"One deserts for love, my dear."

"Yes, in operettas when the soldiers are made of chocolate."

"Well, is not life a farce, or a caramel? But I am going to tell you what I want. I am well informed, because as an ex-ambassadress, I am apt to know of government matters and, furthermore, few men hesitate to give me their confidence."

"I have, then, been informed that our government is going shortly to suspend all visas on passports in order to prevent tourists entering Egypt."

"That is right."

"Now, I want to go to Cairo. And as I don't want to put myself in the position of being deported as an undesirable, I have come this evening to ask you for a *laissez-passer* which will serve me in any emergency."

"My dear friend, I am charmed to hear that you intend to go to Egypt, but you ask me the impossible."

"And why?"

"Because your presence there would interfere dangerously with my work."

"And is that the reason why you refuse me?"

"I will sign the pass on one condition, and that is that you will promise to come to my headquarters in Assouan."

Lady Diana manifests her surprise. The General directs at her a sharp glance, tempered quickly by a smile. It might have been a dagger soaked in

honey. "Do you promise, dear friend?" he insists. "You wouldn't have the heart to go to Cairo to amuse yourself while I am busy chastizing the revolutionaries in Upper Egypt?"

"Assouan will be in the war zone. Do you imagine that they will allow a woman in that 'No-woman's Land'?"

"Diana, that will happen because it will be my wish. I will give you a safe-conduct which will allow you to go freely throughout Egypt and the Sudan."

"Thank you, General."

"But don't forget the condition that I have made with the granting of the paper."

"And supposing I forget to come to see you near the first cataract?"

"Then I shall be regretfully compelled to decree that you are undesirable, and that you must depart by the first boat, *manu militari*."

"Warren, are you speaking seriously?"

"I have never been more serious in my life. I give you just two weeks from the time you debark at Alexandria to come and take tea with me in my tent."

"That is an order?"

The General rises. He approaches his visitor and places his hand on her delicate wrist. Lady Diana looks sarcastically at the red insignia striped with gold on the revers of his khaki collar. She awaits his reply. This reply the General gives her with a significant pressure of the hand:

"Diana, there are some dangerous poisons which one takes voluntarily—you are among them. I drank once before of that hemlock. I have often wanted to lift the cup again to my lips. You bring it to me by chance. Don't take it away again. There——"

"I had thought you better equipped to exercise self-control, Warren."

"You have carried me away, body and soul, mind and will-power."

"I do not believe you. A man like you is never the slave of any sensation."

"How wrong you are! I carry chains when I choose to do so, but I know their exact weight to an ounce. That is what is essential. Here is your pass, Diana. And remember that it is entirely in your hands to regulate the length of your stay in the land of the Pharaohs."

Lady Diana has risen in her turn. She puts the precious paper in her little beaded bag between a lipstick and the cigarette case of jade.

"Are you leaving so soon?" protested the General.

"My boat is waiting for me to row me back to Valette, dear friend. Furthermore, the presence of a young woman on board a cruiser is dangerous to the powder magazine that sleeps in every sailor's heart—even the English ones! Let me thank you once more for your kindness, and if you do not see me at Assouan within the prescribed time, put detectives on my trail."

"You will come, Diana."

"Perhaps."

Lady Diana leaves the cabin precipitately. General Warren's too close pressure on her bare forearm has made her shudder with disgust. She hastens to bring her visit to an end. At the foot of the ladder she affects to smile again while the General detains her several moments and murmurs imperatively:

"We shall meet in Assouan, shall we not?"

"Yes."

"On your word of honour?"

"On my woman's word. Take it for what it's worth. *In'ch Allah!*"

Already she has jumped into the boat. The tall figure of the officer stands erect against the ar-

moured plates of the warship. Warren salutes, his hand at his cap with its visor covered with gold. Lady Diana replies with a brief gesture. The oars of the Maltese fisherman plunge into the black water. The dark outline of the battleship disappears slowly. Lady Diana, wrapped in her cloak, clasps tightly the little bag which holds the precious paper. She has conquered at the price of a promise—but what does a woman's promise amount to? A soap bubble which Destiny's sharp finger can prick at its will.

* * * * *

Ruzzini paced back and forth. Lady Diana, in a corn-coloured kimono embroidered with silver flowers, watched him anxiously. Back in Naples, she had narrated the story of her rapid voyage to Malta and had shown her safe-conduct to her lover. Ruzzini had listened to her attentively from under frowning brows, and had said nothing. Then he had shown his irritation by rising quickly to his feet :

"But this paper bears Warren's signature."

"Yes—Colonel Burrough ushered me into General Warren's private office without my asking."

"Then you did business with him?"

"Exactly."

"The Commander-in-Chief received you on board the *Cromwell*?"

"Yes, darling; of course he did. You act as though you were astonished."

"I am a little astonished that an English General should act that way toward an unknown."

"I am not a mere 'unknown,' Angelo."

"I know that."

Ruzzini had stopped in front of the open window.

His huge frame was silhouetted against the background of a very black night.

Lady Diana was about to get up to throw her arms around him, when Ruzzini made an abrupt turn, approached the bed, and exclaimed :

"Confess that you already knew Leslie Warren !"

Lady Diana protested :

"You are mad—I had never even seen the man ! My position alone made him decide to receive me politely and to grant my wish."

"Your position and your beauty, doubtless. And how did he behave toward you—tell me everything—did Colonel Burrough leave you alone with him?"

"Darling, jealousy is making you insane—General Warren conducted himself perfectly, as he naturally would toward Lord Wynham's widow. He signed my *laisser-passer*, and he told me that he hoped to see me again when I arrived in Egypt."

"Ah, so he made an engagement to meet you down there ! That's just what I thought !"

"Angelo !"

"But tell me all the truth—tell me now !"

Ruzzini had seized Lady Diana's arms in his hands and, under the violence of his grip, she had fallen backward on the bed. This jealous fury thrilled her. She was smiling, happy because Ruzzini demonstrated so forcefully the strength of his love. She thanked him secretly for hurting her and making cruel red marks on her white flesh.

"Darling—darling—what is the matter with you?"

Ruzzini, leaning over her, held her two beautiful arms bent back behind her supple body. Lady Diana, unable to extricate herself, abandoned herself to the joy of being man-handled. Her kimono, falling away from her perfumed body, framed with silver embroideries her heaving breasts.

"Diana, you are lying to me. I feel it. Swear to me, on our love, that you had never seen that man."

Lady Diana hesitated for a few seconds, and that hesitation was mental torture to Ruzzini, who, leaning still closer to her, his eyes darkened by anger, murmured:

"You see—you have lied. You can't bring yourself to perjure. Who can tell what has gone on between you and Warren in the past!"

He seized the short blonde hair of his mistress above the nape of her neck and jerked her head backward, exclaiming:

"Come now, tell me the real truth—I wish to know."

Lady Diana panted with suffering and the acuteness of desire. She stammered:

"The real truth—is—that I used to know—Warren—in Petrograd. He was with the English Military Mission—but—that's all—that's all—relations purely diplomatic. Nothing that gives you the right—to be jealous——"

"He flirted with you; he courted you!"

"Not even that—I never interested him."

"But did he interest you?"

"You are mad—darling, I beg you—please believe me. I solemnly swear to you that between him and me there has been nothing—absolutely nothing——"

Gradually Ruzzini released his grip. It seemed as though Lady Diana's pious lie was working in him like the venom of a serpent which slowly reaches the heart and paralyzes the victim. Ruzzini rose to his full height and seemed at last to realize that he had been hurting his mistress. Then, overcome by repentant solicitude, he begged her forgiveness. Lady Diana murmured:

"You have nothing to regret, Angelo."

Ruzzini was not listening to her. He wept with

shame and repentance in her arms, and the tears of that brave man were for Lady Diana another intoxicating draught. She lowered her wet eyes with the devotion of a novice bending before a holy image. She wound her arms around him with infinite tenderness, a tenderness soon to be profaned by sacrilegious rites and forbidden pleasures.

Chapter Sixteen

A FORCED CHANGE OF PLANS

LADY DIANA had mounted to the bridge of the *Champollion*, as the boat was drawing near to Stromboli. The splendid steamer had left Marseilles and was headed for Alexandria. Her three black smoke-stacks stood out against the mauve background of the agonizing night. The volcano could be seen on the horizon in the pearly dawn, crowned by a reddish light which gave proof that it was about to become active again. The captain of the ship described to his beautiful passenger various aspects of the volcanic island.

But Lady Diana seemed preoccupied. She had come up because she could not sleep. Wrapped warmly in a chinchilla cloak, she felt her thoughts passing beyond the volcano, beyond the Straits of Messina, to the delta of the Nile.

"When shall we arrive at Alexandria, Captain?" she asked suddenly.

"About nine o'clock on Saturday morning, Lady Wynham, unless we run into a storm."

The Captain smiled and added:

"A storm or the English fleet."

"The English fleet?"

"*Mon Dieu*, yes. I have just been informed by wireless that, beginning to-morrow noon, the entire Egyptian coast will be blockaded."

"And then what?"

"And then we shall not know what to expect."

The titanic fireworks displayed on the horizon by Stromboli left Lady Diana indifferent. She went

down into the Egyptian *salon* of the boat, where the mural frescoes recalled the marvels of Upper Egypt, from the temple of Philæ to the primitive colonnades of Dar-el-Bahri. She slipped into a huge armchair and gave herself up to her thoughts.

At Marseilles, on the evening of her departure, she had received the last radio message from Ruzzini, who was on his way to Africa on board a Greek ship loaded with arms and ammunition taken on at Pinedi. It was intended that this new cargo, destined for the Egyptian rebels, should reach them, unknown to the English troops, by means of caravans which were to pass along to the oases of Siwa, Baharia, Kharga and Kurkur. It was Ruzzini's plan to travel with one of these convoys, so as to reach the war zone between Wadi-Halfi and Assouan.

Lady Diana, with fast-beating heart, recalled their farewell in a hotel room in Marseilles, tragic farewells accompanied by the noise of street cars and the confused buzzing of the city. Her lover was about to undertake the great adventure. He left, resolute and savage—his heart torn between his relentless hatred for his enemy and his great sadness at leaving his beloved. When and where would he see her again? So great were the risks of his undertaking that it would have been foolish to set a definite date. To what dangers would he not be exposed in penetrating the war zone—he a non-combatant, secretly engaged in arming the revolutionaries? Aside from that, how many unknown factors were there to make Lady Diana's grief the more bitter, and her anxiety the more aggravating!

Never had the waves of the Mediterranean seemed to Lady Diana so ominous, or the sky so black. She had often travelled on board the late Lord Wynham's yacht from Venice to Algiers, or from Gibraltar to Constantinople. These were aimless

cruises where insouciance was in order, where one flirted in the warm breeze or killed time at bridge or poker. On board the *Maritza* there was always a guest whose heart was such a pliant thing that Lady Diana could twist it between her cruel fingers. She pulled apart her doll in his blue suit and white and gold cap; she played with his heart between ports, and when they were in view of Sorrento, promised what she later refused at Piræus. When the yacht was anchored again at Cannes or Monaco, she tossed aside her ravelled doll to run off and play a care-free game of golf. As for the ill-treated guest, heart-broken, demoralized, disillusioned, there remained to him the consolation of trying his luck at the Sporting Club, or hanging himself on the palms of the Casino.

Lady Diana no longer conjured up these forgotten pleasures. More important things were weighing on her mind. The last directions of Sherim Pasha and Ruzzini were written in her memory. She knew whom she was to see in Cairo, and by what mysterious chain of spies she could communicate with her lover. There was only one thing that absorbed her—her haste to reach the banks of the Nile. There, at least, she would have the consolation of walking on the same soil as her lover, and she would be informed almost daily of the occurrences of his perilous enterprise.

* * * * *

It was nine o'clock in the morning. A few passengers who had arisen early were already walking on the promenade deck when a deck steward announced the news:

“An English warship has been sighted.”

The passengers scrutinized the horizon.

“Where? Where is it?— Oh, there it is! One can scarcely see it—”

"Yes, it is difficult to make it out in the distance—but it looks very much like an armoured cruiser," and the deck steward added philosophically, "A three-hundred-and-twenty-pounder in my bar would raise the deuce."

A young woman spoke nervously :

"We are not in any real danger, are we?"

A Parisian, leaning on the rail, joked :

"One can never tell, Madame. One must always mistrust one's allies."

The little group of passengers climbed to the upper deck to get a better look at the boat. The exciting news had spread all over the ship by this time, and more passengers soon appeared, excitedly discussing the presence of the boat. The English blockade—what a distraction for the passengers of the steamer!

On the bridge, Captain Angelvin and Lieutenant Valery watched the warship through their glasses.

"It is headed for Alexandria," the Captain said. "Look at the Navy List, Valery. Four smoke-stacks—about twenty-four thousand tons. It is surely a cruiser of the *Sussex* class."

The second mate of the *Champollion* ran through the pages of the British Naval List and said :

"I'll bet it's the *Cromwell*. She was at Valette about two weeks ago and flies the flag of the Rear-admiral in command of the Mediterranean fleet."

Captain Angelvin laughed :

"If you are right, we have run into the flagship. It's just as well for us that we have no contraband on board. They're probably going to inspect us. Instruct the navigation officer to hoist the flags and warn the engineer that we shall probably have to manœuvre."

The silhouette of the *Cromwell* gradually became more distinct. She was scarcely more than two miles away. The distance gradually diminished. Suddenly, a white cloud appeared on the grey

flank, and a sharp reverberation was heard. At the same moment the cruiser showed her colours.

"What did I tell you?" cried the Captain. "We are due for an inspection."

A whistle blew and the tricoloured flag was raised, as well as the flag of the steamship company and that bearing the four letters distinctive of the *Champollion*: "O.U.J.W." A minute later the wireless operator presented the request for identity sent by the British battleship.

"They know that already," replied the Captain, "by the four multicoloured squares along the masthead. There is nothing for us to do but come to a stop a quarter of a mile from the cruiser and wait until she boards us."

The English vessel had, in fact, already lowered a small launch, which soon approached the *Champollion*. The lieutenant in command, followed by three sailors, came aboard and saluted the Captain in excellent French:

"Captain, by virtue of the Conventions of the Hague and of London, as well as on account of the blockade of the Egyptian coast, decreed by His Majesty's Government, I have boarded your vessel. Kindly be good enough to let me see the identification of the boat's nationality, its title of ownership, the roster of the crew, the passenger list and the manifest."

When everything had been verified, Captain Angelvin concluded:

"I trust, Monsieur, that you have found all of my papers in good order?"

"So far as the cargo is concerned," replied the officer, "I am completely satisfied, but there are certain things to be discussed as to the destination of your steamer. The Commander-in-Chief of our Naval Forces has instructed me to give to you these two written summonses. The first informs you that the port of Alexandria is restricted, for a

week, for military reasons, to cargo boats. So, if you do not choose to lose a week's time waiting off the Egyptian coast, you may debark your passengers at Port Said."

"I can see no alternative but to bow to superior force."

"Good. As for the second, here it is."

"The captain of the *Champollion* is hereby instructed to turn over to the officer in charge of the official visit one of his passengers, namely, Lady Diana Wynham, who possesses a safe-conduct signed by General Warren. Lady Diana Wynham shall follow the officer on duty and return with him to the armed cruiser *Cromwell*."

"The Commander-in-Chief of the Eastern Squadron in the Mediterranean,

"P.O. Chief of Staff,

"H. W. PERKINS."

Captain Angelvin read this English text twice and, handing it back to the British officer, declared categorically :

"Sir, I refuse to obey this second command. The passenger in question is travelling on a French line, under the protection of the French flag. I refuse to deliver her to the English naval authorities."

"Even under threat of coercive measures?"

"We are on the high seas. My passengers are inviolable. If it pleases the English authorities to arrest Lady Diana Wynham when she has landed on Egyptian territory at Port Said, they are free to do so. But not before."

The British officer seemed to hesitate. His otherwise courteous bearing gave further proof of his perplexity.

"Would you mind sending for Lady Diana Wynham, Captain?" he suggested.

The Captain acquiesced. He sent for Lady Diana, who immediately came to the bridge. The

English officer saluted her with respect, and explained what had happened. When he had informed her that the French Captain had refused to turn her over to the British authorities, Lady Diana seemed very much moved and, turning to the Frenchman, said:

"I thank you for your generosity and your chivalry, Captain. It is worthy of a French sailor. But it is unnecessary, because I intend to board the *Cromwell* of my own free will. The motive which inspires this special official measure is, doubtless, to enable me to reach Egypt more quickly, since I hold a special safe-conduct signed by General Warren."

"In that case, Lady Wynham, I can only acquiesce and help you into the launch which is awaiting you at the foot of the ladder."

A quarter of an hour later, Lady Diana found herself on board the cruiser. Rear-admiral Sir Bradley Waterbutt received her with cool and somewhat menacing courtesy. He took her into his office and spoke to her in these terms:

"Lady Wynham, I regret to inform you that I have received from the Commander of the British Expeditionary Force who, by virtue of martial law, is now the chief police power in Egypt, an order to keep you under surveillance from the time that we come in sight of Alexandria."

"Oh," said Lady Diana lightly, "so you intend to watch me? The Commander-in-Chief is as much interested in me as that? I am justified in being astonished at this measure because it was General Warren himself who gave me at Valette——"

"I know, Lady Wynham. However, the counter-order is official."

"May I see it, Sir Bradley?"

"Certainly, Lady Wynham. Here it is."

Lady Diana bent over the typewritten sheet of paper and smiled ironically:

"The British G.H.Q. seems a trifle uncertain in its intentions toward me. Order, counter-order—it is strange. And what do you intend to do to me, Sir Bradley? Put me in irons in your hold?"

"Certainly not. You are requested to go directly to Cairo where new instructions will be given you."

"In a word, I am a prisoner in Egypt."

"Oh, that's not exactly the case, Lady Wynham."

"Then I gather that I am going to be spared the joys of a dungeon?"

"You will simply be under the surveillance of the Secret Service, and will be expected to comply with whatever directions the Commander-in-Chief gives you. A boat will take you to Alexandria immediately. I trust, Lady Wynham, that your sojourn in Egypt will be as pleasant as possible."

The Admiral rang, and an officer appeared. He looked at the beautiful visitor with badly concealed astonishment. He listened to his chief's orders and saluted. Lady Diana went out, followed at a distance by the young lieutenant. She suspected that she had fallen into a trap, and behind the bars she fancied she could see the disturbing smile of General Leslie Warren.

Chapter Seventeen

A STRANGE FIREMAN

GUIDES and dragomen prowled about below the terrace of Shepherd's Hotel. The blue *galabbias*, the scarlet *tarboosh*, the grey felt hats of the tourists, the crinkly, black hair of the little boot-blacks, and the white caps of the smart idlers, mingled together in the combination of torrid sunshine and dust. Along the raised balustrade, some Americans, their eyes shaded by black glasses, displayed to passers-by the full length of their silk-stockinged legs. Around some wicker tables covered with unfinished cocktails were grouped strange specimens from Connecticut talking nasal commonplaces about Tut-Ankh-Amen and the lion face of the goddess Sekhmet. On the left, an elderly woman in a corn-coloured duster sat fingering some glass beads purchased in a shop of the *Mouski*. On the right, two girls were smoking amber cigarettes, and were trading scarabs guaranteed by the Mussulman merchants in Luxor to be a thousand years old.

It was noon. Lady Diana, arrived at Shepherd's the evening before, had just descended to the lobby with its Egyptian columns. At the hairdresser's she met the Duchess of Bliss, whom she had not seen for more than a year, and who was astonished to find her in Cairo.

"You here, Diana! You are not afraid of the revolution?"

"No more than of all this cosmopolitan crowd which mobs the Ezbekieh."

"It is true that the happenings in the Sudan do not much affect the tourists here. Let's go for a little walk? The sun is glorious. A cocktail first, because, God damn it, my tongue is as dry as the sands of the desert!"

The Duchess of Bliss was a German-American. She had bought the Duke of Bliss in the market of snobbery in London. In exchange for an annual income of one hundred thousand dollars, he had agreed to keep out of those parts of the world which his wife frequented. It had even been specified in this most unusual agreement that the Duke should never put his foot in certain famous hotels, such as Sheppard's and the Semiramis, nor in the *Café de Paris* or a dozen other well-known places where his presence, in company with his mistress, annoyed his wife. For the Duchess did not intend to allow her husband's sumptuous infidelity to make her ridiculous. Swearing like a trooper, smoking like a sergeant, and drinking like a negro king, she spangled her language with "damn's," "blooming's," "blazes" and a few other charming phrases which convention censors, but which society tolerates—at least in the case of millionaires at large.

"My dear," she cried, taking Lady Diana by the arm, "I adore Egypt. Each year I manage to get robbed when I purchase antiques made by the dozen at Harrod's, and pseudo-antique rugs from Syrians with velvet eyes and an accent which takes my breath away—but I adore that sort of thing. I don't know whether Cleopatra talked through her nose or whether Anthony chewed gum, but I do know that in this damned country one senses the soul of a great lover. Yesterday I went for a ride around the Sakkara pyramid with my dragoman. He walked along beside my white mule and, every now and then, he slipped his hand between the saddle and my seat to be sure that I was secure

on my beast. After a while I became annoyed, and I said to him: 'Say, Mohammed, if that's for the mule, a little lower—if it's for me, a little higher!'— But there he is now, coming to take me to the tombs of the Caliphs before lunch."

The handsome Berber with his complexion the colour of terra cotta, bowed at the foot of the terrace and placed his right hand to his lips, then to his forehead.

"Damned handsome, isn't he?" gurgled the Duchess. "Come on, boy. Darling, allow me to present to you Boutros Abd-el-Masih. He's a sympathetic sort of bird. Come along with us as far as the Ezbekieh, my dear. My car is waiting at the Continental."

The Duchess of Bliss took Lady Diana familiarly by the arm and pulled her along, followed two feet behind by her faithful dragoman. She went on:

"It's curious, isn't it, my dear? In America, like everyone else, I had great race prejudice. I would kill like a mad dog the first negro who dared to touch the tip of my little finger; here, I look at colour from a different angle. Have you ever had an Arab with jet black eyes flirt with you in a desert tomb? No? I assure you that it's enough to make the trip worth while, and the fact that there's a mummy at hand lends spice to the sensation."

Merchants in long white costumes tried to sell them cigarettes, postal cards, bunches of flowers, the last edition of the *Cairo Journal* and amber necklaces. When they reached the Opera, Lady Diana took leave of the Duchess of Bliss and hailed a taxi to go to the island of Gezireh. She had no more than started when two men, dressed in European clothes, but wearing the native *tarboosh*, jumped into another cab and followed her.

"So I am still watched," Lady Diana thought, turning around.

She had recognized the two detectives who had not lost sight of her since she had landed in Alexandria.

The villa which Marad-el-Din Pasha occupied on Gezireh Island was next to the polo field of the Sporting Club. Lady Diana crossed the garden sown with tamarinds, and shaded by tall palm trees, and was ushered into the Moorish *salon* by a black servant dressed in red and bedizened with gold. The Pasha appeared. He was a Copt, a pure Egyptian, who, at one stage of his career, had fulfilled official missions in Europe. Very much of a Parisian, and equally accustomed to London, the Pasha knew every shop on the rue de la Paix, and every tea-room on Regent Street. He was in sympathy with the Egyptian Nationalist movement, although he took no open part in the fights of the political parties.

"We are going to lunch alone, Lady Wynham," he said, kissing her hand. "I thought what we have to say to one another should be said behind closed doors."

And he added with a significant smile :

"Secrecy is all the more necessary because you are being so carefully watched."

"That is true, Pasha. My countrymen seem to have limited confidence in me, apparently. You already know that?"

"Yes, I know already. And I beg you to be as circumspect as possible. You know what has happened. The assassination of the British governor last June—that political assassination which has not yet been satisfactorily explained and which was, perhaps, inspired by an *agent provocateur*, has resulted in the most extreme measures, which have sufficed to drive a wedge between the insurrection in Upper Egypt and that in the Sudan. As a matter of fact, the supreme authority has passed into the hands of Lord Wedford who, in the state

of siege, reigns as absolute master in Egypt. When I say Lord Wedford, I should really say General Warren, his Chief-of-Staff. He alone plans, decides, and acts. Marshal Lord Wedford is a somewhat weary great *seigneur*. He delegates Leslie Warren to act under his ægis. Let us be very careful as to how we operate where Warren is concerned, especially since the Secret Police have been redoubling their activities lately."

"Why?"

"Because the revolutionaries are provided with arms and ammunition of all sorts through unknown sources. A British aeroplane recently bombarded a caravan loaded with machine guns in the middle of the Libyan desert. That astonished the British High Command, which, after barricading the delta coast and the Red Sea, thought that it had cut off the source of supply. As the British cannot intervene in Italian Africa, they have been reduced to doing everything possible to discover those responsible for the smuggling."

Lady Diana was consoled by what Marad-el-Din Pasha said. What did she care for the dreams of the Nationalists and the losses of the British army! Her entire universe was concentrated in the life of one man. All that she wanted was to have Ruzzini achieve his mission as soon as possible, escape safe and sound from the dangers about him and come back to join her in the sunny warmth of some little Mediterranean port full of flowers, perfume, and security.

After lunch, while she drank Turkish coffee, *tête-à-tête* with Marad-el-Din Pasha, in the absence of the four silent servants, she finally formulated the request which she had not dared to make before. But her host had gained her confidence, and she was now convinced that Sherim Pasha, in Naples, had been right. She ran no risk in speaking freely:

"Pasha," she said finally, "I foresaw everything

when I came to Egypt except the secret hostility of General Warren, who, having granted me a pass, now treats me as a suspect and paralyzes my activities."

"I know, Lady Wynham. Sherim Pasha had already informed me that you would be a valuable aid to us if you succeeded in getting into the war zone. But he did not suspect, either, that instead of opening all their doors to you they would put two spies before yours—which only goes to show once more that it is dangerous to underestimate the intelligence of the enemy."

"That being the case, I would like to find a way of advising Ruzzini, so that he will not wonder at my lack of activity—can you help me?"

"It's a dangerous bit of business, Lady Wynham—but if you want to send Count Ruzzini a message, have it ready this evening. I will send someone to Shepheard's Hotel after dinner. You can give your note to him and I will try to forward it."

"Then you know where he is?"

"I know."

Lady Diana's eyes shone with a sudden brilliancy, and she exclaimed:

"Where? I beg you to tell me. I have not heard a word from him for nearly a month. It is more than I can stand."

"I shall not tell you because you are a woman, and being a woman you would do something imprudent. All that I can tell you is that Count Ruzzini is safe and well and that, bit by bit, quietly, patiently, he is carrying out the plan which he has devised."

Lady Diana understood that her host would tell her nothing more. She arose and said:

"Then, Pasha, you promise me to see that he gets my letter?"

The Egyptian, who had risen with her, gazed at

her attentively. He scrutinized her with his black eyes with a disconcerting fixity. He obviously hesitated. Suddenly, as though he had made an important resolution, he approached Lady Diana and said slowly :

"Lady Wynham, I really believe that you are not like other women, and that with you one does not run the risks one would with others. The confidence which Sherim Pasha and his associates placed in you now seems to me more than justified. Therefore, I will make you a proposition. Transmitting a letter to Ruzzini would involve too great a risk—for you, for him, and for me. But would you like to see him?"

"To see him! Oh! And to speak to him too?"

"No. To see him only. If, as I believe, you are sufficiently the mistress of your nerves to control yourself in his presence, I will arrange for you to see the Count to-morrow morning at eight o'clock. But, Lady Wynham, you understand, when you see him, the importance of demonstrating that sang-froid which is so persistently cultivated on that island where you were born?"

"Where shall I be to-morrow morning at eight o'clock?"

"At the hotel, dressed as a tourist. I will come to take you to visit the pyramid of Sakkara. Do you know Sakkara, Lady Wynham? It immortalizes a demiurge of ancient times named Sakker, who had the power of resuscitating the dead—a malefactor to humanity, as you can see. At Sakkara I will show you the—but forgive me, Lady Wynham, my passion for archæology carries me away. Just at the moment when you, unlike Joshua, would like to make the sun go faster. To-morrow morning, at exactly eight o'clock, my carriage will be waiting for you in front of Shepherd's. And, may I reiterate—'sang-froid'? You will never have a better opportunity to exercise

control over your impulses and to master your nerves."

* * * * *

Back in her room, Lady Diana was surprised to find an official document lying on her dressing-table. She tore open the envelope and read these words :

" Dear Lady Diana :

" On my return to General Headquarters after a tour of inspection in the Sudan, I was informed of your arrival in Alexandria and of the ridiculous precautions which my subordinates had chosen to employ in regard to you. I beg your pardon, and I deplore the fact that an officer under my command took it upon himself to annul the rights which my pass gave you. I have just issued official instructions to obviate this error. I hope you will take advantage of your liberty to come to see me in my tent at Assouan. I cannot boast of its comfort, but the tea I have to offer will have at least as much flavour as the tepid water served in London tea-rooms.

" Very respectfully yours,

" LESLIE WARREN."

She went out that evening to dine with friends at Mena House. The two detectives who had followed her for so long had disappeared.

* * * * *

The morning sun was already warming the railway station. On the platforms there was a kaleidoscopic display of peasants in black robes and *fellahs* in light shirts. Lady Diana asked the Pasha :

" Do you really intend to take me to Badreshein to visit your pyramid? "

" Of course, Lady Wynham. Since the surveillance has ceased, let us profit by that. "

" Pasha," murmured Lady Diana, " did you not

promise me something dearer to my heart than all the marvels of Sakkara? Why take me there unless he whom you will show me is in hiding in the shadows of the famous pyramid?"

"Alas! Reality is less romantic than that, and you will not find him in the shadow of the sacred tombs. But we have still ten minutes before the train leaves. Let us watch the loading of these reinforcements for Upper Egypt."

Men in uniform were walking about on the next platform. Half a battalion of Sussex Rifles was climbing aboard a train.

"It's a long train," said the Pasha. "Let's go to the end of the platform."

He led Lady Diana along. At the last carriage he stopped and pointed to the engine:

"That little engine is going to pull that long train. We are certainly very short of supplies."

Lady Diana had looked indifferently at the locomotive. These details interested her little. Gradually brought by the Pasha beside the tender, she let her eyes fall on the engineer, an English soldier from the Royal Engineers, who was wiping his levers with an oily rag, and on the fireman, a native, who, bending before the open furnace, fed it with chunks of coal.

Suddenly Lady Diana's heart began to beat at a terrific rate and her throat contracted with the shock of her stupefaction. She had recognized Ruzzini in his sweat-soaked clothes, Ruzzini with bare feet and arms, a dirty *tarboosh* on his head, his face almost unrecognizable.

The Pasha divined her emotion. He took her by the arm in a familiar manner and led her toward the other platform. Lady Diana walked along obediently, apparently indifferent, but within, a veritable tempest. Her pulses beat feverishly. Ruzzini, firing a train full of Tommies! What characteristic audacity! What a hazardous way

of reaching Luxor, Assouan and the headquarters of his enemies!

When they were well out of hearing of the passers-by, the Pasha whispered :

"I congratulate you, Lady Wynham. Your self-control has passed the baptism of fire."

"Who helped Ruzzini get on that train?"

"We—his secret allies. But it is time for us to go."

"Please forgive me, Pasha. Truly, I have not the heart to admire the relics of your Pharaonic civilization. I am going back to my hotel to pack my trunks and leave for Assouan. *In'ch Allah!*"

"I beg you to be careful, Lady Wynham, if not for your own sake, for his."

"Why? Warren himself has given me *carte blanche*."

The Egyptian was silent. He looked thoughtfully at the amber beads which he was twisting between his supple fingers and concluded, shaking his head :

"Lady Wynham, be especially careful in your associations with an Englishman who has spent more than twenty years in the East."

Chapter Eighteen

A SERIOUS ACCIDENT

LADY DIANA, once more in her hotel, had stretched herself on the bed. She did her utmost to sleep in the hope of dulling her anguish. She slept for a few minutes and then, suddenly, awoke with a vice-like grip at her heart. She was haunted by the unforgettable memory of Ruzzini firing a British military train. To defy danger so casually, to brave the enemy in that manner seemed to her the act of a gambler who risks his life on the fall of one card. Ruzzini spoke Arabic admirably. That facility he had acquired through his association with the Egyptians who secretly sympathized with the Nationalist movement, but he was in danger of detection at any moment. Furthermore, Lady Diana knew as well as anyone that an English court martial does not take military law lightly.

At two o'clock she went down to the grill for lunch. The Duchess of Bliss harpooned her at the edge of the terrace with a long-distance smile. At the same moment, some newspaper boys ran along the sidewalk. The Duchess remarked through her nose :

"What's the idea at this time of day? Has Tut-Ankh-Amen sat down on the head of the Sphinx?"

A friend of the Duchess's, Selim Youssef Bey, came running up the steps, waving a newspaper on which the ink had scarcely dried.

"Have you heard the news? Have you read the special edition of the *Bourse Egyptienne*?"

"What has happened?" said Lady Diana, whose anxiety was suddenly renewed.

"Just look, Madame, an English military train has been derailed near Wasta. The report says there are sixty dead and one hundred and eighty wounded."

Selim Youssef Bey installed himself comfortably in an armchair and read the following lines :

"We hear from Wasta that a military convoy that left Cairo this morning for Luxor was derailed at half-past twelve under circumstances at present inexplicable. It seems that the speed of the train being dangerously accelerated at a critical corner, the locomotive jumped the track and threw the entire convoy into the ravine. During the first investigations, the absence of an engineer or a fireman in the locomotive was revealed. Since their bodies have not been found in the vicinity, it is assumed that they jumped off well before the catastrophe took place. This mysterious circumstance leads to the belief that a crime has taken place and that the derailment was carefully planned by the men who were running the train. The military authorities have immediately begun an investigation."

Lady Diana was no longer listening. She made her excuses to the Duchess of Bliss and, under the pretext of an engagement at the Semiramis, went directly to the house of Marad-el-Din. She found the Egyptian in his smoking-room. The special edition was lying on the table.

"I have been waiting for you," he said, rising. "I was sure that when you heard the news you would come to see me."

Lady Diana controlled her emotion. Without so much as trembling she carried to her lips one of the Pasha's cigarettes and asked :

"Did you know what was to happen?"

"No, truly, Lady Wynham. Ruzzini begged us to substitute him for the native fireman who assisted the British Engineer on the military train. With the aid of my friends, I managed that with-

out arousing suspicion. But we had not the slightest idea that he intended to wreck the train."

"He is not dead?—Pasha, you don't think, do you—that——"

"On that point, the telegram is perfectly clear. Had it been an ordinary accident, the two men would have been found killed or wounded, not far from the overturned locomotive. The fact that they have both disappeared proves definitely to my mind that when they put the train into high speed they both jumped from the engine."

"But, in that case the English engineer would appear to be Ruzzini's accomplice, and I can't bring myself to believe that."

"Then Ruzzini must have got rid of the troublesome engineer by killing him before he put on full speed. In any case, we will know the facts within forty-eight hours, because once he has arrived at his destination, we shall be able to communicate with him. If, in four days' time, I am still without news, I will admit that the representatives of the British Intelligence Department are cleverer than we."

Chapter Nineteen

AN UNWITTING TRAITOR

IN spite of Marad-el-Din's advice, Lady Diana had gone to Luxor. The Pasha had said to her :

"I entreat you to be careful. I am committing the greatest of indiscretions in giving you the name of our confidential agent down there who will show you Count Ruzzini's present hiding-place. I know within twenty-four hours you will have gone—you will be unable to resist the temptation."

And the Pasha had shown himself to be a good prophet. In spite of everything, in spite of every appeal to the common sense which warned her to stay in Cairo, Lady Diana had taken the train. She was too happy in the knowledge that the man who had occasioned the railroad wreck at Wasta had not been discovered and, hidden in Luxor, awaited the psychological moment to go on with his work. She anticipated the moment to come when she could see Ruzzini again, even though for a few minutes only; console him with a glance; encourage with a word; assure him once again that her love would sustain him through any danger.

At Luxor, Lady Diana had gone to the Winter Palace. Tourists, indifferent to the crises of the distant revolution, had gone on their tiny donkeys to explore the tombs in the Valley of the Kings. They crossed the Nile under the white sails of the casual *feluccas* and seated themselves on the terrace of the Palace to watch the sunset in the reddish haze over the Libyan mountains.

That evening, Lady Diana set out on foot on the

road toward Karnak. Marad-el-Din Pasha had marked out for her on a piece of paper the exact spot where Abd-el-Hady lived. He was a retired official of the Egyptian Government who now inhabited a small villa situated between the new Copt church and the American mission.

Lady Diana walked through the dusk, counting the houses. She stopped before a hedge of tamarinds and *camerops*, went up a path of dry earth and was about to knock at the door when a face appeared in the window of the first storey. The head disappeared immediately, and steps resounded in the vestibule. The door was half-opened.

"Lady Diana?"

"Monsieur Abd-el-Hady?"

"Come in quickly."

Lady Diana entered the hallway, and the Egyptian ushered her into a small room furnished unpretentiously and dimly lighted. In almost correct French he addressed her:

"I was advised of your visit, Madame. What can I do for you?"

"Let me see, even for fifteen minutes, the man to whom you have kindly given refuge."

"Gladly, Madame, but you will have to hurry."

"How did he escape from the accident?"

"By first killing the engineer. When he had thrown the body out, he put on full speed and jumped himself. He spent that day wandering on the left bank of the Nile after swimming across. That evening, he offered his services to the men piloting a large *ghareb* loaded with wood and headed for Luxor. Five days later he landed here, and arrived at my house in the middle of the night. He knew that I would take care of him once he reached Luxor. I had no idea that he intended to wreck the train; that makes his presence in my house even more dangerous. Also, I beg you, Madame, to make your interview with him as short

as possible and not to return here until I send word to your hotel."

"I promise. Where is he? In what room is he hidden?"

"He is not in the villa. He is in a wooden hut at the back of the garden. I will take you there."

Abd-el-Hady went out. Lady Diana followed him along the path. There was no wall around the garden and only a thin hedge separated it from the neighbouring fields. Abd-el-Hady had reached the door of the cabin; he turned to Lady Diana and said:

"He is there——"

And then the drama unfolded with amazing rapidity.

* * * * *

Five men in uniform abruptly appeared. Some rose from behind the hedge, the others came around the corner of the hut. The first two brutally dragged Lady Diana to the villa. The other three, with revolvers in their hands, forced the door of the shed. Lady Diana heard the sound of a struggle, but, literally carried into the villa, could see nothing. Two British policemen stood guard over her in the doorway of the open vestibule. She saw an automobile start off in the direction of Luxor. Soon afterwards, steps sounded on the pathway, and an English officer appeared, wearing three stars on his shoulders, and a brassard with the letters A.P.M. on the sleeve of his khaki uniform. He introduced himself:

"Captain Nicholson, Chief of the Military Police of the Northern Sector." As Lady Diana was unable to utter a word, he went on, "General Headquarters ordered me to watch every move of yours in Luxor, Lady Wynham. Consequently, my men followed you. You have, without knowing it, led them to this house—that's enough for us. It

enables us to find the man we want as well as his accomplice who owns this house. Good evening, Lady Wynham."

The policemen had gone. The Captain saluted smartly and turned away. Lady Diana followed him and asked :

"Captain Nicholson! And what about me?"

"What do you mean?"

"Aren't you going to arrest me, too?"

The officer made an evasive gesture and replied :

"I have no further orders—excuse me, Madame _____"

He saluted again and tranquilly descended the three small steps which led to the pathway. Then Lady Diana was alone in the abandoned villa—alone in the dark vestibule. She looked at the grey-blue sky gleaming with stars and felt that she was about to faint. So as not to fall, she was forced to cling to the door.

Chapter Twenty

A TENT IN THE DESERT

TEN days had passed—sad, terrible days. Days heavy with waiting. Lady Diana had heard nothing since Ruzzini had been arrested. Beside herself with anxiety, her nerves distraught, she had been unable to sleep. General Leslie Warren's second message had haunted her throughout the preceding night. She had received it at the Winter Palace Hotel. A soldier of the signal corps had made her sign the receipt, with the placidity of a military man carrying out his monotonous duties. On the little piece of paper Lady Diana had read these words, written in the indifferent hand of the telegraphist on duty :

“How many times two weeks have passed since you landed in Egypt! You have not yet come. I am awaiting you at Assouan. You will at least have the surprise of learning here news of the man who interests you.

“Sincerely yours,

“WARREN.”

She had read these disquieting lines twenty times. What did the General mean by this intentionally laconic phraseology?—What significance should she attach to his threatening allusion to the man who was a prisoner of the British Military Police?

Lady Diana's anxiety was so keen that the jarring of the train strained her nerves to the highest pitch. She had taken the little white train with blue windows which daily crosses the deserted hillsides in a cloud of hot dust, and had arrived that evening at Assouan. As she left the train—the only woman authorized to enter the war zone

—a young *aide-de-camp* of Marshal Wedford's, a lieutenant of Bengal Lancers, presented himself.

"General Warren commissioned me to meet you, Lady Wynham, and to take you to his headquarters. Don't be surprised if it seems rather far. Although Lord Wedford lives in the middle of Elephantine Island in a requisitioned hotel, General Warren has pitched his tent on the left bank of the Nile."

The neighbourhood of the station at Assouan presented a strange spectacle. The sellers of postal cards and the mule boys had given place to British troop trains. There were nothing but wagons and mules in the seething mass of caps, Hindu turbans and Scotch bonnets.

The *aide-de-camp* escorted Lady Diana to the river's edge. It was six o'clock in the evening, the twilight was weaving scarfs of orange clouds beyond the hilltops, beyond the palm trees of the island wrapped in a violet dusk. But the beauty of the Egyptian evening went unnoticed by Lady Diana. She paid no attention to the guttural song of the four boatmen who rowed the *felucca* across the river; she thought only of her meeting with Warren and the portentous interview to take place in his tent.

The boat arrived. The Marshal's *aide-de-camp* cautioned her :

"Be careful, Lady Wynham, may I help you ashore?"

Lady Diana's fingers grasped the officer's politely offered hand. Her heels sank into the damp sand and freed themselves again with his aid.

"Where is General Warren?"

"In that tent, Madame—you see the red and white lantern?"

* * * * *

Leslie Warren was standing in front of his tent, which was well enough lighted by two electric

lamps. There was a small folding desk, several wicker armchairs, grass matting over the sand and a campaign telephone. General Warren, like a great many British officers who have served in India, preferred a tent to a billet.

There he stood—bare-headed, thin, very straight, his hands clasped behind his leather belt. He looked at Lady Diana frozen on the threshold.

“Come in—do come in, my dear friend. I had given up hope of seeing you in this place, inaccessible to everyone except those provided, like you, with a pass. Sit down. You look a little tired? That little desert train, isn’t it? If I had not been in a hurry to see you again, I would have sent the government boat that would have brought you in three days. But we had no time to lose.”

The General smiled ironically and added :

“Hours, now, are precious.” He insisted, “Hours!”

Lady Diana summoned up all her strength to address the General without showing her anguish :

“Listen, Warren, let us not play a comedy which, under the present circumstances, would be infamous and ridiculous.”

The General protested :

“Who speaks of comedy, my dear? We shall dine here all alone in this tent and shall have the time to speak frankly. My only apology is for offering you so modest a dinner. But governmental rations are not very varied and the chef of the G.H.Q. is less skilful than the *maitres queux* of the international Ritz hotels.”

Lady Diana wanted to protest. She could foresee the slow torture before her. In the clear, cold gaze of her host she read the horrible programme of the fête he had prepared for her.

The General adopted an expression of reproach.

“You are not pleased at the thought of dining with me in this unexpected setting, in the silence

of a night adorned for us with the choicest constellations? Really, my dear, I scarcely know you. Are you no longer that connoisseur of emotion whose claws stripped into ribbons the hearts of those who were foolish enough to enter your gates?"

The orderly appeared and the General gave his orders. A little table set for two appeared.

"How do you like this tent? I'll admit the furniture is somewhat sparse, but I have the means of amusing myself in my leisure hours. See—a phonograph, a few books on occultism in the days of the Pharaohs, and that glass box containing a cobra. Look at it, my dear, that little serpent from the Sudan, with its back marked with red and green. Oh, I forgot the most important thing of all. In that thermos bottle I have an excellent cocktail—you will take a little drink with me, will you not? What shall we call it? 'Gooseflesh' or 'Expiation?' Chin-chin, my dear!"

* * * * *

Lady Diana was incapable of eating. General Warren was astonished, affecting a well-simulated sincerity. Buttering a piece of toast with great care he exclaimed:

"You aren't hungry? Oh, of course, if I were a punctilious host I would pretend not to notice that you hardly touch your food."

"Warren! Enough! Let's put the cards on the table. Which are your trumps and which are mine?"

"What a hurry you are in!"

"Where is he?"

"Who?"

"Ruzzini."

"You are, then, interested in the extraordinary gentleman whom, thanks to you, we have succeeded in capturing?"

This "thanks to you" brought so terrible a pain

to Lady Diana's heart—such keen physical suffering—that she turned white. In a low voice she repeated :

“Where is he?”

“If you want to know, he is in the excellent hands of some British guards. But, we will talk business at dessert—do you like this grapefruit? One of my friends who lives in Cairo received them from America and sent some on to me.”

Dinner went on. Lady Diana's torture increased. A heavy silence hung about the tent. Now and then a tethered mule shook his chain. Sometimes the plaintive squeak of a little mill on the other side of the Nile reached them. Warren's metallic voice filled the tent. One would have said that he was getting drunk on words and multiplying them for the mental joy of watching his companion's impatience.

The orderly brought some oranges and disappeared. The General offered cigarettes; Lady Diana abruptly pushed away the nickel box and exclaimed :

“Warren, I've had enough of this.”

The General smiled.

“My word, how nervous you are, my dear Diana!—really, you have been changed in Italy. Nothing would have convinced me that love could so change a woman of spirit like you. And now we are approaching the subject that interests us; but let us follow the chronological order, my friend. I was far from suspecting when you visited me at Malta that you were attracted to Egypt by a Venetian smuggler. I attributed that caprice to a desire to see the bas-reliefs—very improper they are, too!—of the temple of Luxor, or to wander around the shops of the *Mouski*, full of flies, odours and intrigues. But I was mistaken. You came to the Nile to be near the hero of your thoughts. Really, I never would have believed that you had anything

in common with that mysterious personage who has secretly been arming the rebels if, through mere chance, a report of our Intelligence Service in Italy had not happened to come to my notice. This little tale amuses you, my dear? Yes? Well then, since there are no secrets between us, I will show you the part of the report that concerns you. Amusing, isn't it, to be immortalized in the records of the War Office? Look."

The General had hidden the upper and lower parts of the document under some papers. Lady Diana could read these lines :

"—as regards the activities of the Italian who seems to be in liaison with Dr. Hermus and Sherim Pasha, it may be useful to know that he has a secret intimacy with a lady of the British aristocracy. If our information is correct, the lady in question is the widow of Lord Wyham, former Ambassador to Petrograd."

"You can see from that," the General continued, "how enlightening that paragraph was to me. I knew, after that, that you wanted to get to Egypt to communicate secretly with our bitterest enemy. I decided that by allowing you to do so we would sooner or later find the man we wanted. In that regard, I must admit, my second in command made a great mistake in my absence. He made you land in Alexandria under the visible surveillance of the police. What an error! When I was put in possession of the facts on my return, I wrote you that letter of apology and ordered an end to the open surveillance."

General Warren gave a short dry laugh, lit a cigarette and went on :

"Of course, I replaced it by an occult system, operated by experts who passed unnoticed. The object was to leave you in a false security and incite you to an imprudence. You committed this imprudence by going to see Abd-el-Hady in Luxor. It was the best way of telling my men that the

man they wanted was there. I do not need to tell you more. You saw what happened. Your Lovelace and his accomplice were both arrested and taken to General Headquarters under heavy guard—with that, the curtain falls on this excellent last act of my comedy.”

Lady Diana had listened to this without saying a word. The General watched her curiously. There was in his gaze the morbid satisfaction of a male enjoying the mental torture of a woman in his power. He crossed his long legs in their riding boots and added sneeringly :

“I gather that the report from Italy is true. Angelo Ruzzini is, then, your lover?”

“That is right.”

“My dear friend, I shall not permit myself to make an oration to you on patriotism, nor to emphasize how shocking this discovery may be to a General in the British Army—but that you, an English aristocrat, bearing a name honoured in our Peerage, could give your love to a Venetian gentleman who is the sworn enemy of your own country, is really carrying a disregard for consequences a little too far.”

“The decrees of my heart are above your laws, Warren.”

“I know that, nor shall I lecture you any longer. I, your friend of long standing, acquit you of this complicity and I have advised the officer who is in charge of the investigation to close his eyes in regard to your choice of lovers. Unfortunately, the court martial has been less indulgent toward your handsome *condottiere*.”

Lady Diana shivered, and repeated :

“The court martial *has been*——”

“Oh, yes. Courts martial are always expeditious in the field—especially in cases as flagrant as that of Count Ruzzini. Contraband of war—high treason—a train derailed—two hundred victims on

his conscience, to say nothing of the engineer whom he deliberately murdered. What more evidence is necessary to condemn a man, I ask you?"

"Ruzzini—has—already—been tried?"

"Yesterday. He was condemned to death."

Lady Diana closed her eyes. A thousand little stars flitted beneath her lids, while the blood rushed to her head. Her fingers desperately clutched the arm of her wicker chair. Had she been standing, she would have fallen.

"The guilty man will be executed at daybreak," added Warren, continuing, in a vein of hypocritical commiseration :

"There is no doubt that the execution could be delayed if I suggested it to the Marshal. A reprieve would give several days of grace. And you know that when a condemned man has a few days it is possible, with the aid of accomplices, for him to escape. The wisdom of the world says: 'While there is life——' But this is all Utopian talk—why should you want me benevolently to check the sentence?"

The General's last words had surprised Lady Diana. She had a slight feeling of hope. She summoned all her courage and demanded :

"Warren, be frank, you can do a great deal to help my lover as he stands at the threshold of death—that is true, isn't it? Tell me, you could sign a reprieve, couldn't you? For you are the real head——"

Warren made a vague gesture with the unction of a prelate, totally unexpected in him. He shook his head slowly, softened the tone of his voice and answered :

"I am not going to say 'no,' on principle—that will depend somewhat on you, my friend—a great deal on you——"

Lady Diana rose. She exclaimed :

"Naturally, the same old story. You would

like to have me in your arms, resigned like a poor, trapped animal. That's your entire aim."

"Diana, please don't be so modest. A poor beast like you is a feast for a king. Furthermore, you only half understood me. I do not insist. It is quite agreeable to my masculine pride merely to conquer your former reiterated refusals. In the course of my career, I have experienced a number of extraordinary sensations, but never that of savouring the surrender of a woman who gives herself to one man to save the life of another she loves. I've read a great deal about that sort of sacrifice, but what is literature compared to reality? What is the play of words compared to the hostile shudders of a humiliated woman? Diana, I know your body very little. Our flitting pleasures left me only one desire: to enjoy them all again. This seemed a propitious night. Had you sacrificed your pride, I would have had the rare joy of tasting on your reluctant mouth kisses like slightly bitter fruit. You refuse. Your will shall be done and so shall that of the court martial, at five o'clock in the morning."

"Warren! You are an unspeakable cad! I shan't stay another second in this tent!"

"Very well, Diana. I will see that you are properly escorted to the Elephantine Island. You can sleep with a serene soul and your pride intact in the little room that I have prepared for you."

The General rose. Before ringing, he added:

"But the night is not yet over. You have still seven hours to reflect. If you change your mind, you can tell the man on guard outside your house to bring you back. In any case, I shall have fruit, cold coffee, cigarettes, and some records for my phonograph."

* * * * *

Would a lover, though he were more jealous than Othello, reproach his mistress for giving herself to

another man to save his life? Who could solve the problem in cold blood? We all know that a man crazed with jealousy can commit passionate crimes under the influence of emotion. But the same man, prisoner in a cell and awaiting death with the approach of dawn, sees a devil approach him: "The woman you love and who loves you can save your life by giving herself to the man who holds your fate in his hands," murmurs the devil. "Do you accept the sacrifice? Will you owe your life to the kisses of the other?"

The frightful dilemma presented itself to Lady Diana in all its horror. As the hours passed and she paced her dark, silent room, she turned the thorny problem over and over in her mind. She dug her nails fiercely into her poor bleeding hands.

So far as she was concerned, the choice was made. She was ready to give herself to Warren, to do the impossible for the sake of her lover. But if Ruzzini escaped death, Warren would not fail to let him know what intervention had allowed him to live. Could a lover of his ferocity ever be reconciled to this skeleton in the closet? Lady Diana continued to pace the floor, measuring the fleeting hours on her watch. Suddenly she shuddered as though Reality had violently struck her on the shoulders. It was four o'clock in the morning. Why did she hesitate? What were all these subtle considerations when her lover's life was at stake? Does one argue with Death when one can close the door in his haggard face?

She leaned from the window and called the sentinel:

"Take me to General Warren's tent!"

"Yes, Madame," the soldier answered, "I will wake up the man on the *felucca*."

"Hurry," she ordered.

The soldier replied placidly:

"Yes, Madame."

Chapter Twenty-One

A STRANGE PIN PRICK

GENERAL WARREN smiled sarcastically as he ordered the soldier to return in the boat to the island.

"I admit, dear Diana, that I no longer expected you."

"I have come to buy a man's life."

"That is precisely what I imagined. It would not please me if you found any joy in the acts I shall exact from you."

Warren had taken Lady Diana by the forearm. He gave a pitiless laugh and elaborated:

"There would be no pleasure in what is about to take place if it were to your taste—is that not so?"

He rose and poured out two cups of coffee, and continued:

"Besides, you did very well to hesitate so long. There is scarcely an hour left in which to effect this difficult rescue. The shortness of the time will augment the charm of this interlude and flavour the payment of your debt. I was just about to put a record on the machine to kill time. What would you like to hear? I have the *Blue Danube*, *Madame Butterfly*, a Dvořák *Humoresque* and a jazz tune called: *I Want To Be Happy*."

"No!"

Lady Diana's involuntary exclamation made the General turn around. He regarded her sidelong:

"Oh! And why not that banal little bit of jazz that's so easy to listen to?"

"No, no!"

"I see—it reminds you of something. Am I

right? Yes—yes—yes. I know the evocative power of music. That being the case, Diana, we'll choose it. This American melody will get on your nerves—so much the better. Don't forget that the man you love is suffering in his cell. Furthermore, don't forget that he is suffering through your fault. It is just that you, too, should suffer."

The fox trot began. Lady Diana became dizzy. Baja—the restaurant in the little port on the Bay of Naples—two little white boats cradled on the blue water—a beloved hand resting on her arm. An impassioned look voicing to her eyes an immeasurable love—it seemed to her that these memories were like warm, vibrant rose leaves falling one by one into icy water.

"Take off your hat. And you have no need for your coat here, Diana. It is warm in the tent. May I help you?"

She recoiled:

"No, don't touch me!"

She was already shivering at the awful thought that Warren's hands would soon touch her. Automatically, with brusque gestures, she took off her hat and coat.

"Ah!" said the General lightly, "now you are more comfortable. Think of it, darling, it is years since I have seen your lovely short golden hair—will you permit me?"

Lady Diana shuddered under the touch of his fingers as they caressed her head. Warren observed her reflex action and gazed at her reproachfully:

"Repulsion? Oh, dear—, something has changed you to an extent which would be unbelievable to the most expert psychologist. You, who used to take your pleasures where decent women would not go—you, who told the beads of your fugitive loves with unequalled technique—you now have the modesty of a communicant troubled by an improper look? Suppose I stop the phonograph for

a moment while we arrange the conditions of our contract."

The General sat down at his desk. He took a large official document from a leather dispatch case and tapped it with his finger.

"That, my dear, is the order to stay your lover's execution. I wrote it myself on my typewriter. There are only three more things to add: the address of the Chief of the Military Police at G.H.Q., who, if he receive my letter before five o'clock will countermand the order of execution; the date and, last, my signature as Chief of Staff."

Turning three-quarters toward Lady Diana, he looked at her with satisfaction illumining his grey eyes and added in a quiet tone, exaggeratedly persuasive:

"Would you like to encourage me to write the address of Lieutenant-colonel Simpson by taking off a few more clothes?"

He waited, his fountain pen in his fingers and, as Lady Diana did not move in her disgust, he added:

"I understand, Diana, that your pride is in secret revolt, but you seem to forget that a love of Retaliation is almost as old as humanity. Once my pride suffered through you—you deliberately made a fool of me when I was a willing puppet in your hands. It pleases me to-night to return shame for shame, humiliation for humiliation. Come along, my friend, time is passing very quickly. In twenty minutes the men of the firing-squad will be awakened."

This terrifying thought was like the blow of a whip to Diana, who feverishly, teeth clenched, allowed her dress to fall to the floor.

Warren exclaimed:

"Perfect! Marvellous! You see, it's not such a terrible ordeal. And I keep my word. I am writing the address—so much is done. Now, in

order that I inscribe the date, I must see you with nothing on except your chemise. What about that?"

Lady Diana carried out his wish and Warren whistled admiringly :

"Splendid! That tea-rose linen is marvellous and it sets off beyond description that classic body worthy of the best Greek sculptors. If it weren't so short, it would be reminiscent of the draperies which hang so gracefully on the Tanagras in the museum in Alexandria. Again I keep my word, my dear, and I write the date—you see?"

The General waved the official document at arm's length and remarked :

"Who in the War Office would believe that every detail of this significant order cost one petal more falling from the tender rose of a woman's modesty. Ah, if the most solemn documents knew how to speak! How many royal edicts have been signed on the knees of a favourite who made as much fun of public affairs as of her first thrill? How many ministerial decrees have been conceived in the licentious atmosphere of a perfumed boudoir! But we will philosophize later, Diana. If I am to sign this paper I must see you in the simple array of Phryné before her judges. Mine is the tribunal and I am the supreme and only judge here on the borders of the Libyan desert. Come now, do as I tell you!"

If Warren had not been so sure of his triumph, if his judgment had not been blinded by his confidence, he would have seen a new look in Lady Diana's eyes—would have remembered that wild animals at bay sometimes turn on their captors! Was his victim's apparent humility sincere? Was he not overestimating his power when he judged that Lady Diana would offer herself on the altar with the passivity of a calf tied to the white stone of the sacrifice?

"Sign first, Warren."

"Lower the sails first, Diana."

He held his fountain pen ready to sign. Diana, standing a few yards away, did not move. There was a long silence. Warren laughed sarcastically :

"Come on now! Totally naked! Let that slender shoulder strap slip off!"

Diana did not make a move. She was a white statue covered by an irreverent sculptor with a profane bit of lingerie. At last she spoke :

"Warren, I shall obey you, but accord me the favour of leaving the room for a moment. When you return, this chemise, the symbol of my last struggle, shall have fallen. Then you will sign the order and may do with me what you please."

Warren hesitated long enough to see that there were no firearms in sight. Reassured, he rose to his feet :

"Very well. I will make this last sacrifice to your outraged modesty. I will go for one minute only into the little tent adjacent and, if you keep your word, I'll keep mine."

* * * * *

The General had no more than disappeared when Lady Diana put into execution the plan that she had conceived in the solitude of her bedroom on the island. She quickly took off her chemise and placed it in plain sight on the General's desk. Then, she hastily wrapped herself in her travelling coat, knelt beside the box of records and opened the little glass cage containing the cobra.

The serpent was asleep, coiled up in the cotton-wool. She had learned during her travels in Hindustan how to handle the most dangerous reptiles without fear of being bitten. Mastering her fear and repulsion, she seized the snake by the throat and lifted it from its wooden prison. It was a small cobra with black rings on the hood, no larger

than a black snake, less than two feet long. She plunged the reptile's head into the inside pocket of her coat so that contact with her skin should not tempt it to bite. With her right arm partly concealed in the folds of her coat, she waited.

Only a few seconds later Warren returned. He made a gesture of astonishment and exclaimed :

"You are all dressed again?"

Lady Diana threw a significant look at the little pile of linen reposing on his desk amidst a mass of papers. Warren smiled with satisfaction and gallantly inhaled the perfume that lingered in the still warm garment. While he voluptuously breathed in the fragrance of this intoxicating bit of linen held in his left hand, he took up his fountain pen in his right and said :

"I sign."

Rapidly the pen slid across the paper and fell on the table. Warren arose, impatient :

"And now, Diana, you'll not continue to wear that coat that conceals the most gorgeous treasure in Upper Egypt. Take it off!"

"No!"

"Now! I demand it."

"Go ahead if you dare!"

He hurled himself toward Lady Diana. She made no effort to resist. The mere touch of her bare shoulder, slipped from beneath the lynx collar, accelerated the passionate rhythm of his desire.

"Oh!" he cried out loudly, "a pin has pricked my finger!"

While he examined the painful prick by the light of the lamp, Lady Diana, seized by a nameless terror, took three steps to the opening of the tent and flung out the cobra. The snake fell on the sand and disappeared into the night. Lady Diana had uttered a cry.

"What's the matter?" exclaimed Warren, who was examining his forefinger under the light.

Lady Diana summoned sufficient strength to answer :

"Nothing—I—I thought—I—saw—a bat come—into the tent. There are vampires around here, aren't there?"

"You are mad, my dear. But had you a large pin stuck in your coat about at the waist?"

"Oh, perhaps so. Are you seriously hurt? Why, that's nothing much!"

"No, of course it isn't. Come into my arms, Diana—with you I will forget that Scotch thistles have spines."

"Yes, yes! But don't forget to send the order first, I beg you. It is already half-past four. Day will soon break."

"Right you are. I gave you my word, and I'll keep it."

He went out and hailed a guard in the distance. A few minutes later he re-entered the tent.

"It is done, Diana. In ten minutes, Lieutenant-colonel Simpson will have the paper. The firing squad will be dismissed. And now, the rest of the night is mine—with you!"

General Warren suddenly put his hand to his forehead and said :

"I seem a little feverish. It's your fault, Diana, or rather the witchery of your beauty that has gone to my head—let's have a whisky and soda."

He looked at his finger again, felt it and went on :

"That's damned funny, you know. It looks as though my finger were swelling up. Oh, rot! If I take a good 'shot' of straight whisky everything will be all right."

He filled the glasses and offered one to Diana :

"To our love-passage of the past, dearest! To the brilliant renewal of our former song!"

He drank. Then, suddenly, with a violent reflex he broke the glass by hurling it against the table.

Just as abruptly he raised his hand to the back of his neck and bent his head to the side.

"What can be the matter with me? I beg your pardon, my dear, a sudden pain in the muscles of my neck—a sudden unaccountable little attack. Damned stupid!"

Lady Diana was observing him closely. Her pallor would have betrayed her had not Warren been so preoccupied with his own suffering. Secretly horrified, she followed the progress of the poison. She shuddered now at the thought of daring to touch the terrible reptile.

"I feel better," said Warren stretching himself. "Let's amuse ourselves."

He approached Lady Diana again and kissed her brutally on the mouth.

"Oh, the refreshing taste of your mouth! What a delicious remedy for fever! But come along, darling, don't be so inert! You get no reaction? I don't even inspire you with disgust? Oh, but we must overcome that indifference. Wait a minute, my darling child, I've found a means to make your nerves vibrate! I shall show you from a little closer the cobra sleeping in its cage."

"No! Oh, no!"

"Ah, you see—you already react, Diana! I put on this thick leather glove for protection and I pick him up this way—look!"

He had opened the box and examined the reptile's bed.

"What! My lodger has escaped?"

"That's enough, Warren, I beg you!"

"It's damned funny—how could he have escaped? How—oh, my God——!"

He was unable to finish his sentence. He began to groan, with a regular spasm of the lower jaw. Drops of sweat broke out on his forehead. He seized his right arm with his left hand and felt of it. Agony dilated his pupils. He swore:

"Hell! What's the matter with me—is my arm paralyzed?"

Lady Diana had retired to the back of the tent where an unaccountable fear riveted her to the spot. Panting, she witnessed the first symptoms of a frightful agony. She watched Warren who, for several minutes, stood watching her in turn, his hand clutching his right shoulder. It seemed that light was gradually, slowly, dawning in the General's brain. He had another spasm before he was able to say in a harsh voice:

"What pricked me when I touched you? What?"

Lady Diana could not reply. Warren's staring eyes, piercing hers, hypnotized her from a distance and froze her to the spot.

"Are you going to tell me what pricked me?"

Perspiration flooded the forehead of the officer, his hands trembled. The poison running through his veins increased more and more the contraction of his jaw. He had evidently guessed the truth, for suddenly he panted:

"Ah, you devil! So you have murdered me! You let it bite me—but I won't let you get off, though!"

He tried to walk toward the adjacent tent, doubtless to get his revolver, but his strength failed. His legs gave way beneath his weight and he fell to his knees beside the table. His drawn face was so terrible to see that Lady Diana could not bear the sight. She screamed, rushed to the opening of the tent and ran out aimlessly into the night, moaning.

Warren, half paralyzed, clutched the table. In the wreck of his senses his will still survived. He concentrated every bodily effort to reach his left arm to the table. At last he succeeded in knocking over the telephone. Eyes starting from the sockets,

he seized the wire, gradually pulled the receiver toward him and called :

"Hello! Give me—Colonel Simpson—immediately!" He clung desperately to the corner of the table and repeated in a harsh voice that weakened as he spoke :

"Hello—Simpson—are you there? Listen—I am dying—serpent bite—hello—hello—Annul the order—which—which I—just sent you— Let justice follow—its course—hello—do you understand me—Simpson? Hello? Listen—you must also—arrest——"

The General was unable to continue. Lady Diana, hearing his voice, had divined his intention and rushed back to the tent—too late to cancel the fatal message—just in time to prevent the utterance of her own name! At that moment she had broken the wire and definitely cut off communication.

Warren was now too weak to move. Almost bent double, wracked by frightful spasms, he regarded Diana sidelong, foaming at the mouth and fighting desperately against the action of that venom which was gradually attacking his heart and would soon paralyze its beating. He still had the strength to say :

"My lovely lady, you are just too late. He will die at the same time as I. Before me—for—I'll live fifteen minutes—more. I—wish to——"

But Lady Diana no longer heard him. Her nerves could stand no more. She had fallen in a dead faint, and while she lay on the sand, motionless, half-naked, arms stretched out like a cross, face bloodless, the dying man held with terrific energy to his corner of the table like a drowning man clinging to a life preserver. He panted quietly, his ears alert. He waited; he did not wish to die before the other. Astonishing power of will that can master physical pain and halt an inevitable passage into Infinity!

Dawn had come. An ashen streak of light crept through the door of the tent. Warren, limbs contracted, fists clenched, mouth gaping, eyes glazed, was listening still, his head quivering at set intervals. He seemed to say: "Well—hurry up. I am only waiting for you, to die too!"

Suddenly, a salvo broke the morning silence, in the direction of Assouan. With that Warren's body made a sudden start and abruptly collapsed, to move no more.

The sun lighted the eastern sky, chasing away the shadows of the night. In the solitary tent lay a dead man and a woman in a swoon. On the other bank of the Nile, the monotonous screeching of the mill rose to the calm heavens like the lament of a tortured soul.

Epilogue

NOVEMBER of the yellow veils dragged its tired spectre about the canals of Bruges and stared at its pale face in the placid waters of the Lake of Love.

The Reverend Father Antonio de Salas walked steadily along the Spinola Quay. It was a Sunday afternoon, a beautiful autumn afternoon, calm and warm. The Jesuit, a black shadow on the dead leaves, was on his way to the Convent of the *Béguines*. Indifferent to the splendours of Saint-Sauveur and Saint-Sang, indifferent now to the tranquil waters bathing the stone walls of the drowsy city, he went to the sanctuary where the *Béguines* meditate and pray.

When he had arrived at the house of the *Abbé* Hoormaert, just before the little bridge with its three arches reflected in the green mirror of the *Roya*, he rang. The *Curé* of the *Béguinage* received him with courtesy and asked the object of his visit.

"I come," answered the Reverend Father de Salas, "to fulfil a moral duty to a lady who came to the *Béguinage* only a few months ago. I have come to pay her my respects and to bring her a little consolation. I speak of Lady Diana Wynham."

The *Curé* made a gesture of surprise.

"But Lady Diana Wynham left our house last January. She is preparing herself in the house of a titular *Béguine*, Mademoiselle Dupasquier, who has nothing but words of praise for her pupil. After a year, Lord Wynham's widow will be permitted to take the veil and the vows, and the

Mother Superior and the Council will approve her novitiate."

"Would it be possible, *Monsieur le Curé*, for me to have a conversation with Lady Wynham?"

"Certainly. I will myself conduct you to the door of their house."

The *Abbé* Hoormaert and Father de Salas crossed the little bridge, passed under a dark archway and traversed the rough pavement of the Enclosure.

"Here we are, Father," said the *Curé*, knocking on the door of a small white house huddled close under the calm imposing walls of the *Béguinage*. The door opened a crack. An old lady peered anxiously at them until she recognized the *Abbé*.

"Mademoiselle Dupasquier, permit me to present the Reverend Father Antonio de Salas of the Society of Jesus, who has come to see Lady Wynham."

"Very well, Father. I will take you to the room on the first floor where Lady Diana is at the moment."

The *Curé* bowed. Father de Salas mounted the small stairway and, announced by Mademoiselle Dupasquier, entered the room. Lady Diana, who was reading, rose quickly. She lifted her hand to her heart, and, very pale, uttered a cry of surprise.

* * * * *

She was clothed in a long black dress, very simple, already austere. Grief had scarcely changed her beautiful face. The deep black lines beneath her eyes alone gave evidence of the deep suffering she had undergone. She said:

"Forgive me, Father, but your sudden appearance in this refuge has upset me. It seems as though a procession of ghosts had entered with you."

"No, no, Lady Wynham! Let peace rule again in your heart. I have not come here to bring disquiet to your retreat. For a long time I was in

ignorance of the fact that you had taken refuge in this convent after the events of the past. For weeks after the drama at Assouan I tried, with my friends, to discover your whereabouts. Sherim Pasha and Doctor Hermus, who once lacked thorough confidence in you, have felt almost as deeply as I the immensity of your grief. We were not only shocked by the tragic death of our most beloved friend, but we were distressed by your strange disappearance. For a time, we thought that the English had suspected you and shipped you off to London to undergo the terrors of their justice!"

"Dead people cannot speak, Father. General Warren has not risen from his grave to denounce me. The Army doctor certified that death was due to the bite of a cobra; no one accused me of being responsible. Ah, Father, I cannot bring myself to recall the sad, horrible night I passed without trembling. Had I consented to submit to Warren, Angelo Ruzzini would not have been shot and would have escaped. On the other hand, had I given myself up to Warren's passion, the beautiful sunshine of our love would for ever have borne an ineradicable stain. My fidelity killed my lover. I murdered him because I loved him too much."

"I beg you, Lady Wynham, not to judge yourself so harshly. The mad courage of our friend carried in itself the greatest risks. He tempted Fate; and Fate avenged itself. It is a misfortune which we all deplore—I commend his soul to God!"

Lady Diana had seated herself in an old-fashioned red velvet armchair with a white crocheted antimacassar. Looking through the low window on to the main lawn of the *Béguinage*, where the dry grass was baptized from time to time by showers of leaves, she went on in a tone so full of sadness that it was almost harsh:

"That brave man now lies in the dry soil of

Luxor. I was able to give him a Christian burial in the little Roman cemetery on the road to Karnak. There, thanks to the secret aid of some Egyptian friends, I was able to do some slight honour to the remains of the only man I have loved——

“Oh, Father, a simple little tomb, shadowed by two great palm trees; a stone cross, a bit of granite with his name inscribed upon it—nothing more—nothing but the sun of Africa, which each day will warm that modest stone just as my faithful memory will strive to warm his errant soul. It was there, beneath those palm trees which seem to bend to listen silently to the nocturnal dreams of the dead, on that bit of stone, pink as the flanks of the Libyan Mountains, that I wept over him for the last time. There, for hours at a time, in the majestic peacefulness of the Egyptian evenings, I spoke in a low voice to Angelo Ruzzini. I told him my pain with my lips, I showed him my grief in my tears, I accused myself on my knees in the sand, of not having loved him enough. And when I said my last farewell to that exotic little cemetery, when I kissed the ground which was to cover and to cherish my lover, I promised him that soon I too would find a tomb—a living tomb. I have kept my word. I came to the *Béguinage* of Bruges and in the profound calm of this enclosure, guarded by the Christ on the Cross, I have tried, in the shadow of supreme abnegation, to consecrate my life to the memory of my great dead.”

Father de Salas had listened to Lady Diana with the deference merited by so sincere an expression of grief. He hesitated, then, taking out his pocket-book, he said :

“Lady Wynham, as a matter of fact, I had two reasons for coming to see you. The first, of course, was to transmit to you the condolences of our mutual friends. The second was to fulfil a mission for our departed. Before he left for Egypt, Angelo

gave me a letter, begging me to transmit it personally to you, should he meet with any misfortune. Providence, alas! has decreed that I perform this mission. Permit me, Lady Wynham, to give you this letter."

The envelope lay there on the little black wooden table. Lady Diana looked at it. Her face was convulsed by her emotion.

"A letter? A letter from him?"

It seemed to her that this posthumous souvenir was an echo of Ruzzini's voice, suddenly brought back to life. She dared not touch the envelope. She was trembling.

"One must always do the will of those who are gone," murmured the Jesuit. "Lady Wynham, you must read that letter."

Then, abruptly, she tore open the white envelope :

"Diana, when you read these lines you must not feel that they come from the pen of a man who is dead. You must imagine for a few minutes that I have returned to the world of the living and am talking to you with the same tenderness, the same confidence and pride as formerly. If you ever have occasion to read this letter, it will show that my enemies have conquered me and that my poor body lies drying under the torrid caress of the African *khamzin*. That will not prevent my soul from flying toward you, confiding to you at this very hour my last wish on earth.

"I am sure, Diana, darling, that my death will have been for you a death-blow to a beautiful dream. We dreamed it together, heart to heart, beneath the mirage of a too-blue sky, in the too-beautiful setting of the Bay of Naples! We must have defied Destiny. As I write, I am expiating in the Kingdom of Shadows that excess of confidence and temerity. What of it? Life is a game of cards which reserves all its finest points for those who dare to risk all. There remains, nevertheless, one thing which I would like to ask of you—I who am erased for ever from the list of living beings.

"It is possible that, influenced by your sublime passion and your supreme devotion to my poor self, you will seek to cultivate the blue flame of our dead love within the walls of some retreat. This letter has but the object of dissuading you.

"You are beautiful, Diana. You are still young. Your pretty shoulders were not made to bear the coldness of renunciation. Why should you change your life in order to honour a man who was never even worthy of your love? Believe me—beloved mistress who lighted with her smile the last chaotic months of my life—, believe me, when I say that life still calls you. Go back without regret to the gay round of balls and fêtes, and show yourself again in the splendour of your beauty. The dead are not jealous, Diana. The dead who have known love desire in their hearts that the torch lighted by Eros be carried joyously on. If jazz tempts you, go back to the mad rhythms! If you want new kisses, take them at will! My spirit urges you, begs you to pay homage again to pleasure and joy. All that I want, Diana, is a thought from time to time. Sometimes, between two dances, between two flirtations, between two voyages, you will grant me a moment of remembrance and, gently, you will call to me: 'Angelo!' Then, wherever my body lies—under the warm sand of the desert or beneath the damp shroud of the sea, in a frozen winding-sheet or in the naked earth, my soul will hear your call and, trembling with inexpressible emotion, will answer you through time and space: 'Diana, dearest, be happy!'

"ANGELO RUZZINI."

Father de Salas respected Lady Diana's frightful suffering as she wept in silence. He guessed approximately what the letter contained. Ruzzini had said to him when he gave it to him:

"If I lose my life in this undertaking, I count on you, my dear friend, to dissuade Diana from an act of impulse—I mean by that, prevent her from entering a convent. She is young. Life is too short for a pretty woman to choose that Calvary which

leads to silence and retirement from the world. Antonio, promise me to comfort her, to keep the rough haircloth from her lovely arms. One does penance for an unpunished crime; one does not undergo expiation for having loved."

Father de Salas had promised; and at this poignant moment, although he secretly admired Lady Diana's noble resolution, he was ready to keep his word. With a paternal gesture, he put his arms about Lady Diana's bowed shoulders, shaking with bitter sobs, and said:

"My dear child, the wishes of the dead are sacred. Angelo Ruzzini implores you to forget your grief among profane joys and terrestrial pleasures. I shall be the first to approve if you carry out his wish."

But Lady Diana protested vehemently:

"No, no, Father, Angelo's nobility and generosity move me to tears, but I would die with shame if I had to return to the world."

She made a vague gesture indicating the far horizon of earthly delights.

"There, where I have come from, where they despise Beauty and fear Truth? Try to forget my suffering in the arms of snobs beneath the Walpurgis fires where they cavort in a perfume of lies vaporized by envy? See again those fools whose hearts are no more than shirt fronts—smile at worldly women whose sincerity is no deeper than their make-up? Dance again? Laugh, perhaps? Oh, no. Father! I am happier within the four white walls of this saintly house. Here, at least, I can live with my grief every day. My heart, stabbed by Fate, has a wound that can never be healed; and that wound I shall piously guard. That shall be my flame—the pure flame of an impure and accursed Vestal. I shall not call on God to assuage my pain, but to keep my wound alive. Here, Angelo will be with me hour by hour; I shall

live with his soul, invisible to earthly people, but visible to me who will bring him back to life by my fidelity."

With those words, Lady Diana rose to her feet. She was no longer weeping. She was holding the letter in her hand. In her eyes was the light that shines in the eyes of martyrs marching to torture for the glory of their faith.

"I beg you, Father, leave me alone here. Do not try to make me forget. You would be undertaking a hopeless task. One never forgets the love of a man like Angelo Ruzzini. When one has had the joy of giving one's heart to such a lover, one has too few days to think about the happiness that is lost. I came here like a little bird with broken wings. I shall remain. And in the sweet and majestic tranquillity of this enclosure, I shall live alone. The seasons will follow in their inexorable order; my hair will turn white. The brilliancy of my eyes will fade to the rhythm of the passing years. What difference does that make? I shall stay here—with him, near him, in him, for the man I loved will not lie under the hot earth of Africa. I am confident of the presence of his soul. Sometimes it may quiet the burning fever which consumes me, and it will gently kiss my tired eyes.

"When we were together on the Gulf of Naples, we made wonderful plans. The clear blue sky was the witness of our emotion. The grey sky of Flanders will teach me that it is vain to ask too much of life; the northern fogs will teach me the relativity of material things.

"Ah, my Father, two years ago in Venice I wandered about, insouciant, in my gondola with its prow and stern adorned with two bronze chimeras. I idled on the deceptive water of the lagoon with no suspicion that my life would prove an illustration of that too cruel symbol—I idled in the shadow of my two chimeras. Love! Happi-

ness! I thought I had them. I caressed for a short time their fluttering wings; I was intoxicated by the richness of their colours, and then—my chimeras flew away——”

Father de Salas had left the little white house. He walked slowly about the lawns. The bells of the town invited the believers to vespers. Sometimes a dry leaf soaring in the calm air alighted on his path, like a friendly bird. Father de Salas walked noiselessly, as though he were afraid of disturbing the silence that had made its nest in the belfry of the *Béguinage*.

At the arch, he turned back toward the house where Lady Diana lived. He hesitated a few seconds. Then, his features set with the emotion that brought tears into his black eyes and contracted his lips, he took off his hat. Gravely, solemnly, he paid tribute to a woman's grief.

THE END

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